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THERE WAS NOBODY IN SIGHT

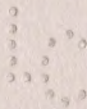
HELEN OVER THE WALL

The Adventure with the
Fairy Godmother

BY
BETH BRADFORD GILCHRIST



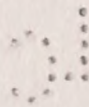
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Foreword

(Which ought to be an Afterword)

HELEN THAYER is the kind of girl who is always having adventures. She does not recognize herself as this kind at all, any more than you who are preparing to read about her are likely to think that what happens to you would be worth putting within the covers of a book. Which is only another way of saying that every girl has a story in her life, possibly a whole shelf of stories. It is plain, then, that when such a girl as Helen once gets into a book, she is likely to run through several books before she gets out again. Her next adventure is the one that befell her after she went home from "Red Top" and the name of it is "Helen and the Uninvited Guest."

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Helen Over-the-Wall

Helen Over-the-Wall

CHAPTER I

CROSSPATCH

THE scowl deepened on Helen's face. It ran up and down her forehead in two little straight ugly furrows. A footprint in the middle of mother's best clump of pansies! There was no mistaking whose footprint. Carelessly it crushed down into the yellow blossoms. Helen's lips set in a hard angry line as she picked out the broken sprays.

The twins cavorted around the corner of the house and made toward the picket fence. At the moment the fence was masquerading as a stockade, while the twins figured respectively as settler and Indian. Ruthlessly Helen broke in on the game.

"Come here!"

They came unwillingly.

"What's the row?"

Helen pointed. "Aren't you ashamed, when mother's sick?"

"Did we do that?"

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"One of you did it."

"It must have been when you were scalpin' me this morning," said Tess. "I told you to look out where you stepped."

"Why didn't you stay still and be scalped then?" Ted rejoined. "Bet you did it yourself."

"Bet I didn't."

"S-s-sh!" warned Helen. "Can't you keep still even under mother's windows?"

"'Tain't hurt much," Ted whispered hoarsely, inspecting the pansies.

Helen held up the broken stems. "How often has mother told you not to say ain't?"

"She don't do it that way," muttered the boy.

"Doesn't," said Helen.

"Don't," said Ted obstinately.

"Doesn't."

Ted stared defiantly.

Tess whirled to her twin's defense. "It's worse to be cross than it is to use bad grammar, so there!"

Helen gathered up the wilted pansies and rose to her feet. "I don't wonder mother's sick," she said. "Now go around on the other side of the house and don't come back here all the rest of the afternoon. Do you hear?"

"We ain't deaf," said Ted.

Helen stalked haughtily into the house. The

CROSSPATCH

twins retreated to the domain mapped out for them and sat down under a syringa bush.

"Do you think it's so—what she said?" Ted asked.

"What's so?"

"That we've made mother sick."

"She was cross," said Tess. "And when she's cross you can't ever tell for sure. But—but—— Oh, Ted, what if it was!"

He dug grimy hands into his pockets. "I wisht we hadn't got into those pansies!"

Tess nodded, big tears welling over her eyelashes.

"Cryin' don't—doesn't, I mean—do any good," said the boy.

"I can't help it." Tess sniffed.

"'Cos if we have made mother sick——" he began.

She scrambled to her feet and, snatching his hand, tugged him up. "Let's go find Phil and ask her."

They squeaked on tiptoe up the piazza steps and through the hall, peeping into room after room.

"Bet she's up-stairs," whispered Ted.

"S-s-sh!" said Tess.

Laboriously, teeth set over lower lips, they mounted. From a darkened room a girl slipped to meet them, finger on lip. She pointed to a

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room, and they creaked cautiously in, the girl following. Then she shut the door.

"Mother's asleep," she smiled. "Did you want something?"

They told her, worry sobering their usually merry faces. Phillis sat down in a big chair and gathered them both into her lap.

"You haven't done any more than the rest of us to make mother sick," she said. "We're all in it together, if anybody's in it, Floyd and Helen and you two and I. Perhaps we haven't helped her as much as we might or been careful enough not to give her things to worry about. We can all think of things to do over if we could, things we can begin to do differently right now. But we didn't make her sick, so put that idea out of your heads for good."

"What did make her sick?" asked Ted.

"She got tired, tired working so hard for so many years to keep us well and happy when there was too little money to do it easily."

"When I grow up to be a big man," said Ted, "I'm going to make a lot of money and give it all to her."

"When we didn't mind right away, did it make her tired?" Tess inquired.

"I suppose it did."

Ted frowned.

CROSSPATCH

"Then we won't have to wait till we get grown up big before we can begin to help her," said Tess.

"You can begin right now while she's sick. You have been beginning, haven't you? I've noticed."

They reached up around Phillis's neck and hugged her.

"Wisht Nell was like you," said Ted.

"Oh, no, you don't," Phillis told him. "Who would tell you stories?"

"Wisht she wouldn't be a crosspatch then," Ted grumbled.

Phillis patted his shoulder. "She was tired, tired and hot and worried about mother. Don't forget that."

"She ain't any tireder 'n you are, I'll bet."

"Isn't," prompted Tess.

"Isn't," said Ted.

"Feel all right now?" asked Phillis. "I must go back to mother."

They nodded. "Can we go down to Bob Denison's?"

"You may."

"We meant may." Tess hugged her sister again.

Phillis watched them tiptoe down-stairs and waved a smiling good-bye as they let themselves out of the front door. But her eyes were indignant as she turned toward the darkened room.

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“I’d like to shake Helen! What a crosspatch she is, anyway.”

Crosspatch, meanwhile, was scrubbing away at the pots and kettles which had cooked the dinner, and her brow was clear. Only a very small prick disturbed her conscience. She hadn’t meant to be cross, not one single time, while mother was sick. She hadn’t felt cross, either, till to-day. But anybody would have been roused by finding mother’s pansies stepped on, so she comforted herself. It was righteous wrath that had boiled over in her.

Carefully she carried the dish-water out of the door and emptied it on the pansy bed. She would try not to forget it, but empty the dish-water there every day. That ought to make the blossoms larger. And then when they grew big and beautiful she would put them in a low green vase and take them up to mother and set them on the table by her bed and say, “Mother, see what the dish-water did.” And mother would laugh and say, “Dish-water is worth something, isn’t it, daughter, when it blossoms into pansies?” And Helen would kiss her and say, “Yes, even dish-water is good for something.”

At this point in the imaginary conversation the iron spider missed its nail and precipitated itself with clang and clatter into a line of kettles on the lowest shelf of the pantry. The furrows leaped

CROSSPATCH

into place between Helen's eyebrows. "Oh, dear!" she wailed. "What a perfectly awful noise! Oh, dear, I wish I wasn't such a drop-cat."

Then she stole up-stairs and tried to persuade Phillis to give over her place in the sick-room, after which she stole down again and spread out her books on the kitchen table.

"They might just exactly as well let me stop school these last weeks," she fumed. "I could make it up easily in the summer."

A couple of kittens came and romped over her lap while she worked at the books before her. Obviously the minutes passed. Tick tock, tick tock, tick tock, said the clock on the shelf. It said it over and over and over and over, monotonously. Then it stopped. Helen worked on.

After a while, Phillis pushed open the kitchen door and set the tray she carried on the shelf by the sink.

"Mother has just waked up," said Phillis, "and she says she had such a nice nap. Why, what has happened to the clock?"

Helen jumped guiltily to her feet. "It's stopped!"

"Didn't you wind it last night?"

"I forgot."

"Then the bread—— Oh, Nell, don't tell me you forgot to put the bread in to bake!"

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"I'll put it in now."

Phillis sighed. "It won't be very good. Here, let me see it."

"I was waiting for it to get time," Helen explained. "You said to put it in at three and then the old clock went and stopped and it never got to be three."

"I should think you'd have noticed it was growing late."

"So I should, if I hadn't had to do a hundred dozen things at once. If you'd only let me stop school, Phil, then I could give my mind to the house. Or if you'd do the kitchen stunts and let me take care of mother—I'd love that. But you know I can't do two things at once. You know it, and yet you expect me to get my lessons and bake bread all at the very same minute. It isn't fair."

"I shan't expect it any more."

"Now you're cross."

Phillis was silent.

"I'm sure I don't see how I could be expected when I was studying to notice that the clock had stopped. They tell you to concentrate your mind when you study."

"I don't think you need to be told that, Nell."

"Do you mean you want me to unconcentrate it?"

"Oh, dear, no. There, child, take a glass of

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water up to mother, won't you? And stay a little while with her, but don't talk much. I'll tend to things down here."

"Has mother been waiting all this time for a glass of water? Why in the world didn't you say sooner that she wanted a drink?"

"She was in no hurry. Don't forget not to talk much."

Very cool and quiet and peaceful were the minutes that slid away one after another in the room up-stairs. They touched Helen's spirit with gentle fingers, soothed and bathed and dressed it once more in its pleasant garments. Mother could always smooth your puckers out, the girl thought. Sick or well, she made you feel as though you liked people. And there were times, Helen owned it honestly to herself, there were very often times when she did not feel as though she liked anybody or anybody liked her. Except mother. Always mother.

It was strange to sit down to supper without mother. Not even after three weeks of sitting down to all their meals without her had the Thayers gotten over the strangeness of having mother lie in bed up-stairs, lie there because she was too tired to get up. To-night things were stranger than ever. Helen was sure it was the bread that gave this added eccentricity to the meal. If the

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bread is right, other things may be wrong, but if the bread is wrong, no amount of rightness in other things can quite efface the knowledge of what's wrong. To-night Helen felt as though everybody in the family craved bread, nothing but bread, and the bread was decidedly odd and its oddness was her fault. She had forgotten to wind the clock.

"Hello," said Floyd, "what's the matter with this bread?"

"It rose too long," said Phillis. "Have a graham cracker."

Tess lifted big eyes over the edge of her glass of milk. "Mother says you shouldn't talk about what you have to eat," she reproved glibly.

Floyd laughed. "All right, Miss Propriety. What have you twins been up to all day?"

They told him in a flood of speech.

And then Floyd went up to mother and almost before she would have supposed there had been time to prepare it, Phillis was standing at Helen's elbow with mother's supper tray in her hand.

"Would you mind doing the dishes again—just to-night? I know how you hate doing them, and I'll make it up to you in some way to-morrow."

Of course Helen said yes, though she didn't want to say it in the least. While she twitched the glasses and china in and out of the hot water

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she tried the effect of saying no, tried it by means of many hypothetical conversations. But the fact that she had really said yes made all the difference between Helen up-stairs with mother where she felt nice and smooth and purry, like a kitten stroked the right way, and Helen down-stairs in the kitchen battling with soap and water and soiled dishes, where she felt hot and cross and scratchy, like a kitten driven into a corner by a teasing puppy.

"They're having a confab of some kind, I know they are. That's the way they've done it before, Floyd and Phil closeted with mother after supper. They make a lot of plans and then they come down and announce 'em to the twins and me. They don't seem to think I'm any older than the twins. And I like to help make plans. I think Phil might have stayed down here and done the dishes—of course, I'd have helped—and then we could both have gone up to Floyd and mother. When they do come down and try to tell me I'm not going to listen. I'll be too terribly busy to hear a word they say."

Cheered by this resolve, Helen plodded through the dishes, not forgetting the pansies' drink at the end, and corralled the twins for bed. They came cheerfully. Bedtime was a bitter pill successfully sugar-coated in the Thayer household by

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the stories "sister" told. There was only one sister when it came to telling stories. Phillis for bumps and bruises, games and schemes of all kinds, Phillis for the daytime; Helen for the go-to-bed hour, when their sister Crosspatch blossomed into a wonderful person with a magic tongue that drew them on and on through regions of adventure and delight. And Crosspatch was seldom so happy as when, with a twin snuggled on either side of her, she followed whither her imagination led.

But to-night, just as she had anticipated, when the twins were tucked in and the sheets were turned well under their chins "to keep off the scratchy old blanket," as Tess called it, and the good-nights were all said and the last sleepy inquiry had been made in regard to some detail of the story,—yes, ex-actly as she had anticipated, Phil called out as she passed the open door of the sitting-room, "Aren't you coming in?" And when she had to go in to find her algebra, if she was to know anything at all in class to-morrow, then they got her.

"Letter from Cousin Anne," remarked Floyd, tossing it across the table toward her, as she stood pulling the algebra from beneath the heap that had accumulated above it.

"Yes?" said Crosspatch.

"Aren't you going to read it?"

CROSSPATCH

"I don't know that I need to, do I?"

"Well, I should rather say you did."

"Don't you want to know what she says?" asked Phil.

"Not particularly." (Which wasn't strictly true. Oh, Crosspatch!) "Was that what you were talking about so long in mother's room?"

Phillis's eyebrows flew up and down again as she gazed at Floyd. "So that's the trouble," said the eyebrows. Floyd's left eyelid drooped abruptly. "You're right, my lady," returned the eyelid. Helen intercepted the exchange and cordially disliked it.

"Oh, come now, get over your grouch and read the letter. Something's going to be doing in your direction."

"Cousin Anne has sciatica again," put in Phillis.

The algebra dropped and Helen's hand went out toward the letter. The written lines were few and her glance devoured them at one sweep.

"And she wants you, Phil. Of course, she wants you. And I can run the house and take care of mother! Oh, joy! Oh, Philly, Philly, Philly, I'm so glad!" Helen had seized her sister and was squeezing her in ecstatic arms.

"Well, I guess not!" said Floyd. "You're going to Cousin Anne, not Phil."

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Behind Helen's astonished face Phillis hastily shook her head at him.

"You see, it's this way, Nell—who is there to go but you? I can't, with mother like this. And I've always gone before when Cousin Anne needed one of us. Now it's your turn."

"It is not," said Helen. "Why, Phillis Thayer, I never saw her in my life!"

"I never had seen her when I first went to 'Red Top.'"

"You're different. Everybody likes you. Besides, it's silly for you two to talk like this. What good would I be if I went there?"

"Plenty of good, if you chose to be," said Phillis. "Cousin Anne simply wants somebody to amuse her while she's tied to her bed."

"Is mother silly?" asked Floyd. "We've talked it all over and she says you're to go."

"Not quite that," Phillis hastened to interpose. "She said she hoped you would be willing to go. She leaves the decision to you, but she wants you to go."

"Mother!"

Helen stared at the two alert cheerful faces for a minute of absolute silence.

"But you're the one to go, Phil," she reiterated at last. "Cousin Anne knows you. She's used to you. She won't like me."

CROSSPATCH

"Make her like you," said Floyd.

"You're just teasing me," Helen said. "Aren't you teasing me?"

"Why, Nell, don't take it so hard, child!" Phillis put out a comforting hand. "Anybody'd think we wanted you to be boiled in oil."

"I'd rather," breathed Helen. "Truly I'd rather. But you didn't mean it. You're going, Phil."

"I? What is the child thinking of? If I went, who would take care of mother? And steer the twins clear of mischief? And keep the house decently quiet? You know the doctor said mother must not be fretted or worried if she is to get well quickly."

"I would. You're not so fearfully much older than I if you do 'child' me all the time, Phillis Thayer!"

Phillis repressed a smile. "My place as eldest daughter is with mother when she's ill."

"Just because you happened to be born first is no reason for thinking I can't do anything at all!"

"I don't think it, and you do a great deal, Nell. But you couldn't manage at all now. Aren't you lighted punk to the twins' firecrackers? And how many times have I finished the dishes alone because when you carried away the silver you looked in a book and forgot to come back? And

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what about the clock last night and the bread this afternoon?"

"The bread was because I was studying. And I never forgot the clock before, not one night. Just let me stay out of school. Then I can concentrate all my mind on mother and the housekeeping. It isn't as if she was dreadfully sick, Phil. Quiet and rest, the doctor says. And I'll get Bridget O'Hara to come. Then you'll trust me. I'll go down right now and ask her."

"You won't go a step," said Floyd. "Sit down, Nell, and cool off. Phil's to stay here. That's flat. Now who can go? Think it out for yourself."

"But Phil might go just as ——"

"I tell you that discussion is closed."

"What about you?"

"I?" Floyd laughed. "Cousin Anne doesn't want a boy. Besides, I'm a wage-earner. You'll be proposing Tess or Ted next."

"You see it's you or nobody, Nell." Phillis's arm went around her sister's waist. "You'll have to help us out."

"Call it nobody."

"That would trouble mother. She doesn't want us to desert Cousin Anne."

Desperately Helen fell back on the letter. "She says you."

"Just because I've always gone to her before.

CROSSPATCH

But never mind, you won't have to go if you don't want to. We will write Cousin Anne after you have seen mother in the morning."

After she had seen mother! And mother wanted her to go! But she wouldn't have to; Phillis had said she needn't. So that was settled. Of course it was settled. There was no sense in worrying. And she would remember to wind the clock every night. There! She had forgotten it again to-night. Helen slipped out of bed and crept down to the kitchen, barefoot, to set right her omission. But how could anybody expect you to remember anything when you had a proposition like this flung at you? Only perhaps if she had remembered everything all the days of her life Phillis would have thought her a dependable person, one to be safely entrusted with the care of such a precious thing as a mother. Anyway, she was not going away to leave that mother, not for one single night, not she.

But when morning came and mother was talking to her in that gentle, tired voice and when she said, "If my little daughter can see her way to going to Cousin Anne at this time, she will make me very happy, but I leave the matter in her hands," Helen capitulated. She had known all along that [she would capitulate and the knowledge had added to her vehemence. Now she

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swallowed very hard two or three times, and after a while she said in a small dry voice, "Do you want me to go so very much, mother?"

"It would relieve me of some anxiety, dear. If none of my girls was with Cousin Anne in her time of need, I am afraid I should worry."

"Then I'll go, mother," said Helen bravely.

CHAPTER II

“RED TOP”

“THERE! that button’s gone. I meant to sew it on last night and then I forgot. Now I’ll have to take this waist off and I’ll be late—I know I’ll be late. Don’t put those slippers on that side, Phil, right on top of my organdie! What are you thinking of? Oh, dear, now I’m cross again; and I didn’t mean—— But I don’t want to go! You know I don’t want to go! Oh, Phil, mayn’t I stay at home after all?”

With lips shut very tight Phillis squeezed the slippers between a slim copy of “Lorna Doone” and a pudgy bottle of violet water at the end of the suit-case farthest from the organdie, and turned to the little sister twisting excitedly before the glass.

“Floyd has taken your trunk to the station and bought your ticket. I’ll sew on the button. Where is it—under the bed? Don’t get down on your knees, child; you’ll be all dirt. Your hair looked perfectly well before you began to fuss with it. Anyway, it won’t show under your hat. Oughtn’t there to be white thread in this basket?”

“I packed it.”

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"Both spools? Never mind. Put on your hat while I get some from mother's room. And don't worry—there's time enough."

"I don't want to have time enough! I'd just hope that old train would go off and leave me, only I s'pose they'd make me take the next one. Oh, dear!" as Phillis returned with the thread, "I think you're perfectly horrid, all of you, when you know she won't like me and will wish all the time I was you, Phil. I shouldn't wonder if she sent me home."

"If she does we shall know whom to blame." Phillis's needle flew at a point between her sister's shoulder-blades. "Why, child, you don't suppose I'd shirk Cousin Anne's sciatica if I could get away, do you?"

"You could get away, if you only thought so."

"How can I fasten my thread when you twist about? You know we've been over and over all this forty dozen times already. Stand still, while I button your waist. And, oh, Helen, do try to keep your temper! Remember how poor we are. College for Floyd depends on Cousin Anne's helping to foot the bills, and she more than half promised me a year at art school. Besides, haven't you set your heart on going to college yourself?"

"I don't think it's nice to buy your way by kowtowing to your relations."

"It isn't kowtowing. Here's your skirt. Get

“RED TOP”

into it, feet first. I'll tuck your petticoat in. Yes, Floyd, the suit-case is ready. Close it, will you, and we'll be down in a jiff. It isn't kowtowing, Nell. Listen! Mother told me last night that five years ago when father died Cousin Anne said to her frankly, 'Jessie, if your family will stand ready to help me out in my tight places, you can rest assured I'll help you out in yours.' Sciatica is her tightest. And she isn't very cross; just a little abrupt and quick to say what she thinks—like you. I've told you how lovely 'Red Top' is. Coming, Floyd! Oh, Helen, do your best for all of us! Run in to mother. Yes, I know you didn't mean to be cross.”

With a little sigh Phillis glanced around the room to make sure that nothing had been forgotten. Helen's tooth-brush! Where did the child keep the case for it? Never mind. Snatching up a new one of her own and thrusting in the brush, she ran down-stairs.

In the hall Floyd waited. “Been jawing you, has she?” he asked, unbuckling the straps of the suit-case.

“Don't let her miss the train, Floyd. I couldn't stand getting her ready again.”

“She will, if she doesn't hustle.”

“Crosspatch, lift the latch,
Sit by the fire and spin,”

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chanted a twin, pirouetting madly on the piazza, while her other half turned handsprings up the path.

“Why don’t you two skip down the street and say good-bye at the corner? Chase yourselves and see who beats.”

The twins set off with a whoop.

Up-stairs in a darkened room a thin white hand patted a girl’s cheek. “There, there, dear. Of course you would like to stay and help me get well. But I couldn’t do it half so quickly if I had to lie here and think of poor Cousin Anne suffering alone with nobody to amuse her. I need Phillis now, and so it is you who must represent the family. Remember that you stand for us all, and guard the lips carefully, dear.”

“I can’t, mother, not like Phillis. She is just so sweet always, like a lump of sugar, and I—I guess I’m skimmed milk. Things stir me all up and I sour.”

“You must fight it, dear. Fight hard to be sugar. Good-bye.”

In another minute the girl was down-stairs and out of the square, shabby old house under the huge elms that had been home ever since she was born and that in all her almost fourteen years she had never left for more than a night or two, except for one unforgettable trip with mother to New York.

“RED TOP”

Now Floyd was hurrying her away, perhaps for a whole month. He even cut short the hugs at the corner where the twins, shelving temporarily a lively debate on which got there first, and remembering only that this going away meant good-bye to their bedtime story-teller, nearly strangled her with the violence of their regret.

Puffing and snorting, the train waited with as much complacency as though it were not in the habit of breaking up families every day. Floyd hoisted Helen's suit-case to the rack, produced a magazine bought at a news stand, and stuck her ticket into the back of the seat ahead.

“Now you're fixed. Good-bye, sis. Give our best to Cousin Anne. And, I say, don't upset the apple cart, you know.”

Longingly Helen's eyes followed her brother's shoulders as they clove the crowd on the platform. It was only by main force that she kept herself from jumping up and running after him. “You've got to go!” she said over and over. “If it kills you, you've got to go.”

Perhaps it would kill her. Hadn't anybody ever died of being away from her own people, where she wasn't wanted? Then think how her family would feel! She could see them bending over her, Helen, lying so still with the lily-white face and the lily-white hands, and they were

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weeping. "We have broken her heart," they said. "Oh, why didn't I go to Cousin Anne as she implored me to?" Phillis was moaning. "How well dear Helen would have nursed me, had I only given her full responsibility!" sighed her mother. "How good we'd have been!" lamented the twins. "We shouldn't have called her 'Crosspatch' once, just 'sister Nell,' 'dear sister Nell.'" And Floyd would take one of those lily-white hands in his and say —

"Is this seat occupied?"

Little beads of water stood on the broad face that capped the jetty black mountain in the aisle. Helen murmured vaguely and squeezed her slim tan self into the farthest corner of the red plush seat. Tinklingly the mountain settled beside her.

"Pretty warm day," it volunteered.

The girl answered by a monosyllable and turned to the window. The station walls were moving! Helen's heart tumbled so precipitately into her boots as to make her almost dizzy. Why, oh, why, if you were Crosspatch, did they try to turn you into Phillis? Phillis, with her pretty blue eyes and her pretty brown hair and her dimples and her iron-clad temper that made everybody want her. Cousin Anne wanted her; mother wanted her; Floyd and the twins wanted her. And Phillis didn't have any trouble being pleasant. She

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got as much credit for acting the way she was made as though she heroically refrained from flying into fifty tantrums a day. “What a lovely disposition Phillis has!” the neighbors said to her mother, and they asked Phillis to help at their parties. When the twins cut themselves they always went to Phillis. Floyd told Phillis all his scrapes. Of course they were nearly of an age, but —but —

A big tear splashed on the linen lap. Helen squared her back on the steaming mountain and pressed her nose against the glass. It was an odd little nose, rather long, and at the very end it tilted suddenly, as though by an afterthought. Helen hated that nose. It had meant well, she thought, just as its owner always did, and like her it ended badly. She also hated her eyes. By no pull of the imagination might they be termed “pools of liquid light,” orbs which occurred monotonously among her story ladies. The narrator’s own were just eyes, of a quite ordinary blue and not nicely lashed like Phillis’s, and between her brows, which were rather heavy, ran two straight up-and-down lines, deepening to furrows when, as Floyd said, “anything disagreed with her from cobblestones to crickets.” The mouth did not mend matters. No amount of pinching, however judiciously applied, with cold cream, served to turn it into a

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cupid's bow. And her hair, brown and thick like Phillis's, had managed to lose all Phillis's curl and fluffiness. Altogether, the face was as unsatisfactory to its possessor as the present situation in which she found herself.

Hot and sooty and strange, the hours clambered on around the face of the little gun-metal watch bearing Phillis's monogram, which Phillis had loaned the night before. Somewhere in the first third of the journey the mountain waddled off, leaving a pleasant sense of space and an unpleasant sting in mother's remembered words: "You can never be too uncomfortable to be courteous, daughter."

Outside the window, a new, rough kind of country was beginning to happen. The magazine slipped down in Helen's lap. When you live adventures, however grumpily, you do not have to read them. Her eyes followed the sprinting telegraph wires with their everlasting dip—slide—rise, dip—slide—rise, dip—slide—rise, for all the world, she thought, as though they were doing a figure in dancing school. Breathless patches of woodland scampered beside the track. A blue hill jumped up against the sky, kept pace for a minute or two, and dropped behind. Sun-splashed brown brooks flashed by, and now a little river joined company with the rails, a clear shallow river, iridescent like

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the speckles on a trout's back. Houses got together in clumps as though to signal the train, but it only shrieked at them, slackened speed a bit, and then thundered on faster than ever.

This was traveling—actually traveling! You couldn't tell what you would see next. It was just as it had been on that trip to New York. Helen had always expected to travel widely, but in her vocabulary traveling was to mean taking your whole family—mother, Floyd, Phillis, and the twins—after you had miraculously made your fortune, and setting out to see the loveliest places in the world, all the places where the dear book people had lived and all those other places where your own friends and relations lived, about which you had heard ever since you were born.

What fun it would be if they were all traveling up to “Red Top” together, she thought, and with that she began to cudgel her memory for everything that mother and Phillis had ever said about Cousin Anne's Vermont home.

“Red Top” was beautiful, they agreed, with its gardens and the acres of red clover that gave its name, with walls running everywhere—gray stone walls around the fields, high brick walls around the gardens—and with an old roomy house overlooking the whole. The house had begun in Helen's great-grandfather's day as a two-room

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farmhouse and had been added to and added to until Phillis declared it made you think of the chambered nautilus, only here no chamber was ever abandoned. All this belonged to Cousin Anne, who lived there alone when she had sciatica, and with cartloads of guests when she was well. But often she shut up the house entirely, and leaving a man to care for the gardens wandered for months in far-away countries. "Red Top's" owner had always been to Helen's imagination even more alluring than "Red Top." What hadn't she seen from the Taj Mahal to Tintagel!

And here was Crosspatch Thayer actually on her way to this wonderful place and this wonderful person whose eyes had looked on Camelot, and who, when they looked on her little cousin, would probably pack her home again in short order. But, oh, what if she shouldn't! For had not Helen promised mother to be good?

At the thought, black and grim and forbidding, the dumps had her again. Splash! Down, down, down went her spirits, just as they often did when dinner was half an hour late. Could it be that she was hungry? Half-past one, said the little gun-metal watch. Time, indeed, to open the dainty lunch that Phillis had put up. When her teeth bit into the second sandwich, Helen's spirits began their upward march. Come what might,

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she would do her best for the honor of the family.

The sun, climbing down through wisps of cotton-batting cloud, began to warm up the plush beside her. Dust filled her nostrils. Outside it rose in clouds from yellow roads crawling over rugged hillsides.

“We need rain,” said the lady across the aisle to the conductor.

He agreed, and Helen scorned them both. Didn’t everybody know they needed rain? Why talk about it, then? Beyond the lady sat a child, small and demure, and between them she now noticed a cat’s head.

“I didn’t see any cat when those people came in,” she reflected. “They must have had it in that basket on the turned seat. Won’t the twins laugh when I write them about a traveling cat!”

She craned her neck in furtive curiosity. The cat was a big, black and yellow creature, the body shrouded in a blue bag gathered around the neck so the head was free. Calmly it sat, looking about quietly and blinking its large yellow eyes at admiring trainmen and passengers. Now the little girl gathered it into her lap that it might the better look out of the window. Helen laughed.

The woman beside the child rose and crossed the aisle. “May I sit with you a minute? I leave at the next station, and you go on to the

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Junction, I see. The little girl with the cat gets off at Fairfield, three stations ahead. This is her first journey alone. Would it be too much trouble to ask you to see that she is all right?"

Helen felt like an old and experienced traveler to be thus appealed to. "No, indeed. I'll be glad to see that the little girl gets off at Fairfield. Has she much luggage?"

"Only the cat. Come over and meet Mr. Dooley."

The child looked up shyly at the stranger.

"This young lady will see that you get off at the right place, Ellen," said the woman. "Won't Mr. Dooley turn around and speak to her?"

"Mr. Dooley!" cried Helen. "Is that really the cat's name? Whatever made you think of it? But, oh, isn't he huge! He must be a beauty outside the bag."

The little girl's voice was soft and sweet, filling out her words very precisely. "He is. He is the beautifullest cat that was ever born. But Mr. Dooley is just his for-short name; his really truly long name——"

She took refuge behind her curls.

"Now what could Mr. Dooley's long name be?" murmured Helen from the opposite seat. "Let me think. Here's a lovely tawny patch on his head. Maybe he has yellow stockings—has he?"

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Oh, do you call him Mr. Dooley Yellow-Stocking?”

The curls shook violently.

“Then perhaps he has a white button on his tail like one of my kittens at home. We call her Topsy Cottontail. How would that do?”

The curls thought it would not do at all.

“It’s very difficult, isn’t it, guessing names? I don’t believe you could tell me what my other kitten’s name is.”

The curls parted. “Do you give it up?”

“I’m afraid I do.”

“Mr. Dooley Drinkwater Babbitt,” pronounced the small voice triumphantly.

“All that? Honestly? Cross your heart?”

The curls bobbed joyfully.

“Mine is Ellen Babbitt, but Mrs. Drinkwater gave him to me. Ted named him. Ted is my brother. He would shake hands, only his paws are all covered up with the nasty old bag, wouldn’t you, Mr. Dooley Drinkwater Babbitt?”

“Blair! Blair!” shouted the brakeman.

The lady gathered up her bags, kissed the child —“Give my love to your aunt, dear”—and hurried jerkily down the aisle. Little Miss Ellen Babbitt watched her with eyes that grew mistier every minute.

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"Oh, don't!" cried Helen quickly. "Because if you cry, I shall too."

Grave wonder looked out of the wet eyes. "Are you going to see a stranger lady?"

"Indeed I am! How did you guess? I believe you're a witch and you know things without any one telling you. Then perhaps you know where I'm going?"

"Where?"

"I am going—to—an—enchanted—castle."

"Oh!"

"It is rather hard to get to the castle because, you see, it stands in the middle of a lake of fire. They're not high jumping flames, such as you've read about perhaps, but sort of low creepy ones. And the smoke doesn't choke you, it's sweet. So that when the wind blows and the crimson waves beat against the gates, the castle is full of the loveliest fragrance."

"Like joss sticks?"

"Much nicer than joss sticks. It crinkles your nose right up for joy. But nobody can get into the castle without swimming the red seas."

"Do you have to swim the Red Seas?"

"Yes."

"Oh, but you mustn't! It would dead you. Teacher told us last Sunday. All the men that

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walked got across, but the ones that tried to swim were deaded. Please don't try to swim.”

“Then I won't, and thank you for telling me. I'll remember to walk or ride.”

“The riding ones got dead, too.”

“Did they? Then I'll walk. But I must succor the lady of the castle somehow.”

“What's succor?”

“Rescue her—help her out of a tight place.”

“Tell about her.”

“You see it's like this. The lady of the castle sent for me because she is in dire plight. A horrid old ogre has got into the castle—you know something about ogres?”

“There's one lives in the parlor at home. His hole is all blocked with pillows. You scrooch down—oh, so careful, on your hands and knees, for when Ted is home the ogre growls dreadfully, and if he is hungry he jumps out on you—Boo! But he doesn't eat you, not one little bite.”

Helen nodded. “I know that kind of ogre. They're very nice to have around just before tea. But this ogre I'm talking about now isn't a parlor ogre. He's a bad ogre, really truly bad. And he holds the lady prisoner in her own castle. He won't let her walk in the garden among the birds and flowers, or even stand on the parapet and watch the jolly little waves jump up and down in

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the red seas. He's put her in a donjon and chained her flat on her back to a bed."

"What else does he do to her?"

"Every few minutes he runs red-hot needles into her."

"O-o-o-oh!"

"So you see I have to go."

"And will you break the chains and make the wicked old ogre go away? Ted would help. He is a very big and old boy. Only Ted does not come till next week."

"I might send for him if I needed him. Let me see, how could I get you the message? Is Fairfield all the address?"

"Mother told me to say I was going to Mrs. Silas Howe."

"Miss Ellen Babbitt, care of Mrs. Silas Howe, Fairfield, Vermont. I won't forget. This next is your station. Does Mr. Dooley go into the basket?"

From the car platform Helen watched the tumultuous descent of a large spick and span woman and two thin spick and span girls on a small dusty figure carrying a heavy basket with a carefully secured cover. Then there were two more stations and the Junction and after that a funny three-quarter-hour ride behind a fussy little old engine, and Helen found herself stepping down to "Jo."

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The weathered little man with the rusty straw hat topping a thatch of rusty red hair could not be anybody but Cousin Anne's Jack-of-all-jobs, who Phillis had said would meet her. In two minutes with Helen's trunk behind them they were ambling after a brown cob through wide, green-shaded streets bordered by pleasant-looking houses overflowing with pleasant-looking people. And then the houses fell back and let them into open country with long cool shadows stretching across the roads.

“She's had a bad day,” Jo said in answer to Helen's question. “Sciaticy ain't no respeceter o' weathers. Idee now o' pickin' out a scorcher like to-day for tormentin' a critter. How's that sister o' yours? We've got pretty well used to seein' her up in these parts, but it won't hurt us none to git acquainted with some more o' the family.”

As the cob turned in between rose-grown stone walls an impulsive hand touched Jo's arm. “Is this ‘Red Top’? Then please won't you let me walk up to the house from here?”

Obediently Jo cranked the wheel and Helen sprang out. Across reddening seas of clover, busy with droning bees, she could see trees and a house. Her heart was thumping when she stepped on a wide vine-curtained porch; her throat felt dry.

A tall white-gowned woman waited in the door.

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“Miss Bates says will you step up and see her a minute before going to your room, Miss Thayer.”

Vague impressions of quaint cool low-ceiled pleasantness freshened the dusty girl as she crossed a rambling hall and mounted the stairs. In a minute she would see Cousin Anne—Cousin Anne, the wonderful. And then suddenly, before she was ready for anything, a nose beaked out of a white, dead tired face, a nose flanked by two cavernous blue-black eyes that seemed to Helen to probe to her very spine.

“I did not plan to receive you in bed, my dear. But this has been a rather horrible day. How did you leave your mother? And Phillis? It complicates matters when we all want Phillis at the same time, but it is right that she should stay with your mother. You must have had a hot, tiresome journey. Ask Mrs. Higgins for anything you want. And come in again for a little while after tea.”

The mask of dirt came off and the organdie went on in a white and green bedroom overlooking a corner of the garden. But not the small-paned casement windows or the tall thin cupboards over the fireplace, either of which under other circumstances would have roused the girl to raptures, served now to stir more than a passing thrill. So that was what sciatica did to you! And Cousin

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Anne knew she hadn't wanted to come. Helen thought that already Cousin Anne knew everything about her. Those eyes couldn't fail to find the truth, however deep you tried to hide it.

She ate her supper with a lump in her throat that choked the taste out of the wild strawberries and strangled every palate-tickling flavor of the thick chocolate layer cake. It almost tripped her tongue when Cousin Anne began to ask questions again about the family. How she ached to see them this very minute! Floyd would have brought down mother's supper tray and Phillis would be doing the dishes. But who in half an hour would tell the twins their bedtime stories? Did they miss her one teeny bit, their Crosspatch?

The sob almost choked her. So she turned it into a chuckle and managed to make the story of the huge fat woman and of the very small girl with the very large cat sound so funny that Cousin Anne laughed till the tears stood in her eyes.

Nevertheless it was a heart-sick girl who rose when the invalid said, "You have given me a merry nightcap, my dear."

She put out her hand and drew Helen down for a kiss. "It will be hard for you, child, to be tied to the whims of a bedridden woman with a crotchety temper. But I promise not to snare all your hours. Make yourself at home at 'Red Top.'

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There are no rules. Pick anything you like in the gardens, go anywhere, except—you will find one gate locked. Don't ask for the key. Now good-night and sweet dreams. It is the first night's dreams that count, you know."

In spite of homesickness curiosity pricked Helen's thoughts as she undressed in the white and green chamber. Why had not Phillis told her about a locked gate? And why was it locked? Was there a mystery at "Red Top"? If not, why mustn't she ask for the key? But, oh, how far away the dear home people seemed! And because under her prickly skin beat a warm, sensitive heart, Crosspatch cried herself to sleep.

CHAPTER III

THE LOCKED DOOR

WAKING up was with Helen a tolerably long process. Her eyes refused to snap open like Phillis's, as though you had touched the spring that lifts the lid of a box. The first she knew of a morning she was out of the country of Dreamless Sleep, picnicking in the land of Little Naps, and then she was really wide awake, she would have told you, all but her eyelids, which stayed tight shut and heavy as though a sleepy little elf were sitting on each one. Now she must lie and wait for the juices to come in her eyes when they would open of themselves, a much wiser way to do than to pry up the lids by main force and feel stupid all the morning afterward.

But why wasn't Phillis tugging at the bed-clothes, which of course were clutched tight under Helen's chin, and calling, "Get up, Sleepyhead!" and threatening a shower-bath on the spot? Had Phillis slept over? She put out a hand. No, Phillis was up, as usual.

And then memory stirred and shook itself and

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her eyes popped wide as smartly as ever Phillis's had done. Instead of opening on a patch of faded yellow wall-paper peppered by an inky accident to resemble a square of tanglefoot, they met a pale tracery of vines and buds, blossoming near the ceiling into pink and blue morning-glories.

This wasn't home; this was "Red Top." Helen sat up and hugged her knees, readjusting her mind to the happenings of yesterday. The handkerchief under her pillow was still a sad soggy ball. But this morning was not last night. A peep from the casement windows told of rain and a clean, fresh, sparkling world. The breeze that teased the muslin curtains whispered, "Come out! Come out!" The sun beckoned. The garden sent up inviting odors. She dressed quickly and slipping down the silent stairs, slid the bolt on the porch door.

You would have failed to recognize in our heroine the person whom Helen watched five minutes later step on the flagged path that led around the house to the gardens. Not even the robin tugging at reluctant worms on the lawn or the warblers fluting in the lilacs saw the tall slender lovely thing gliding over the grass. Her eyes were made out of the sky just above the larches and for her skin she had borrowed big creamy white petals of the mock-orange bush,

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flushing them with the pink of the late flowering azalea. Her breath came from a bed of pinks under the north window of the parlor and her hair glinted with the gold of the sun and rippled like the fields of clover billowing to the road. Helen thought her a creature fit for the beauties of "Red Top." Her skirts, just the color of young beech leaves, trailed satisfyingly between great pink and white balls of early peonies and yellow spikes of flag to a gate in a low brick wall. The gate opened easily and she was in the rose garden.

"Mornin'," said Jo from the side of a white Rambler. "Beginnin' early, ain't ye?"

Helen jumped. Exit fancy. Presto! In the garden was only a girl holding short crisp gingham skirts away from the wet rose-bushes and chatting with a little rusty-haired man in freckles.

Beyond the roses stretched other walls, each higher than the last and each set with a quaintly patterned iron gate. When she tested them, they swung readily enough. Pooh! What had Cousin Anne meant by saying what she did last night? Then her heart twisted suddenly and began to beat so loud that she could hear it ticking like the grandfather's clock in the hall, only faster, much faster. In the flanking wall of the lily garden, beyond the one that was all iris, grew a door. It was gray and covered with lichens like

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the brick beside it, and a spider's web threaded across the upper right hand corner gave it an air of age and disuse and mystery. Not for worlds would Helen have stood on tiptoe and tried to look over the wall or even given a little jump. Breathlessly she set her hand to the knob, and—stared at row after row of lettuce and beets and beans.

“You tricky thing!”

After that she naturally could not expect much of a similar door, minus the spider's web, in the next garden.

“It will be potatoes,” she thought.

It wasn't; it was corn, short, shining blades drawn up in long quivering lines.

She laughed and turned back into the fifth garden. Within its high walls much was going to happen in the months to come.

“I don't care about the old door anyway,” she said, stroking the fuzzy bud of a poppy happily.

Loitering and dreaming, she came to the end of the garden and a rustic seat. A bee buzzed in the lemon lilies beside it. A bluebird flashed overhead into the lilac bushes and began to sing. Helen had been curled up contentedly for five minutes before she spied a door close by in the wall opposite the entrance gate. Why, of course the garden must lead somewhere! To an orchard

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perhaps, an orchard running up-hill with lovely crooked old apple trees just made for climbing.

With both hands on the knob she pushed and tugged and shook the door before understanding bathed her in rapturous prickly shivers. It was locked.

Weathered and gray, ridged with crosspieces and hung on big iron hinges, there was nothing remarkable about the door. The one with the cobweb had looked much more promising. No crack or knot-hole invited an eye. You could not peek under, nor hope to see over if you jumped your highest. Tree branches brushed the wall, the trunks swallowed by that mysterious Other Side. The bluebird knew all about it. He had winged across at Helen's first scramble. The bee, also disturbed, returned to his guzzling of honey.

The girl retreated slowly backward. There was nobody in sight. She made quite sure of this before, running hastily forward, she dropped to her knees, forgetful of her spandy skirt, and peeked through the keyhole.

Straight ahead rose a tangle of green boughs. Between this and the gate, a patch of brown path met her eye. And in the middle of the path, spilling its sawdust vitals with generous abandon, lay a rain-soaked headless doll.

Jo was still tying up rambler roses when with

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careless dignity and a mud-stained skirt Helen returned.

"The door at the end of the garden beyond the lily one is locked," she remarked.

Did Jo look at her queerly? "So 'tis, so 'tis." He scratched his rusty red head, opened his mouth to speak, thought better of it, and again revised his decision. "The missus's orders. Best not ask questions."

The visitor flounced her pink gingham skirts out of his path. Twice in her first dozen hours at "Red Top" she had been advised not to ask questions. To a person who had merely stated a fact and shown no symptom of interrogation this was naturally irritating. Helen would have flown into Crosspatch at once had she not had so much else to think about. If everybody was going to be close-mouthed, she supposed she could ferret out the mystery for herself. Thank fortune, nobody had told her not to try.

But how much more of an enchanted castle "Red Top" really was than she had known when she told little Ellen Babbitt about it yesterday! She grew so excited thinking of this over her oatmeal, strawberries, and cream that on going into Cousin Anne's room after breakfast she blurted out before she could stop herself, "And how is the ogre this morning?"

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"The what?" demanded Cousin Anne.

Then she had to tell the story she had made up to keep the little girl with the cat from crying, in which Cousin Anne's sciatica had figured as a wicked ogre and Cousin Anne as the lady of a castle. Oddly, Cousin Anne seemed to like it. In spite of the pain, which she described as "nippy" this morning, she chuckled over Ellen's trustful expectations of encountering the Red Sea in Vermont and encouraged Helen to turn her fancies inside out. And Helen spread adjectives so thickly over the gardens as to satisfy even their proud owner, such honest heartfelt adjectives accompanied by such vivid little turns of speech that Cousin Anne declared to listen was almost like seeing them herself. The locked door was not mentioned. It might be an unhappy subject, Helen remembered, and you must not excite invalids if you could help it.

But the ogre was really very cruel this morning, and soon Cousin Anne was too tired to talk and Helen settled herself on the porch to write her home letter. She had a great deal to say and she wrote as fast as her pen could fly, but it was not like talking. You couldn't get any answers or jump up every few minutes to hug your mother and Phillis and hear them say they knew you hadn't meant to be cross.

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“For I was a bear,” wrote Helen, “a perfect bear those last days, and you were angels with shiny wings. But it seemed as though I couldn’t stand it to leave you all, and I’d fly home right now if I were an angel instead of a Mr. Grizzly Four-Paw. No, I really wouldn’t though, for I’m so sorry for Cousin Anne that it makes my throat prick to see her. She has laughed three times since I’ve been here—only I’m afraid it hurts. So I don’t know but that maybe I ought to try not to have her, but she says no, she likes it. Only she misses Phillis. She didn’t say that, but I can tell she does. I’m so awkward and drop things, and I’d tumble over a chair if it was a mile off, seems if. But you know me well enough. Only I’m worse up here, all feet and hands. Whenever shall I get used to myself, mother?

“Cousin Anne has such worse ones that I ought not to mention my woes on the same page. I do hope she’ll be better to-morrow, for it seems as though I couldn’t bear hers and mine, too. That sounds horrid, but you know what I mean.

“Do please somebody write every single day and tell me everything. I’ll die if you don’t.

“The red roses aren’t in bloom at all yet, Phillis, but as the gardens fill eight pages of this letter already, maybe I’d better save something for the

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next time. Only—why didn't you tell me about the locked door at the end of the hollyhock one? It makes me feel exactly like a girl in a book. Why, Phil, why is it locked? Of course I've made up half a dozen whys already, but I want the honest Injun story. Is it a lovery one? Or was there a little girl who lived over the wall when Cousin Anne was a little girl and they always played together and went to school together and did everything together until she died or something? Or—or ——

“With a great huge Mr. Grizzly hug for all five of you—oh, mother, do hurry up and get well!—and ‘write constant’ as Bridget says,

“To your lonesome

“CROSSPATCH.”

Crisp and matter-of-fact and sensible, like Phillis herself, two days later came Phillis's reply.

“Mother is delighted to have you write so cheerfully. She sends her best love and says she knew you would prove yourself a true Thayer. She is proud of you.

“Floyd came in last night chanting a limerick that the twins have hardly had out of their mouths since. Want to hear it?

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“ ‘ There once was a brick named H. T.
Who laid out ma’s nursemaid to be.
But she hiked for Red Top
At a two-forty hop
And now she’s in clover—Te he ! ’

“ They helped with the dishes last night—the twins, I mean—and broke only one, a green sprigged cup. I wish they had chosen the saucer instead, for we have twice as many saucers as cups now. But you never break the things you can perfectly well spare, do you ?

“ After that I rescued Topsy from an early grave, so you can see we had an eventful evening. It happened like this. The twins had gone to bed—how they groaned for you, Nell!—and as it rained Floyd and I lit the lamp in the sitting-room. There we sat, I putting tucks in my old blue dimity, Floyd deep in ‘ The Green Mountain Boys ’ for the steenth time. You know how he reads, with dozens of encyclopedias and histories and dictionaries spread out around him. Suddenly I heard a little click. Naturally Floyd didn’t notice it, and probably I shouldn’t have given it a second thought if I hadn’t remembered seeing the little white point of Topsy’s tail vanishing around Floyd’s empty violin case, lying open on the piano. No sign of Topsy, and the case was shut. That seemed queer, so I lifted the lid and

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out bounded that harum scarum little yellow ball as friskily as though she hadn't managed to provide the Thayer family with every prospect of a first class cat funeral. At present writing T. Cottontail still enjoys good health, thanks to the vigilant supervision of her friends.

"Now, Nell, listen to me. You must not worry about mother. The doctor says she is doing as well as can be expected, and though it will be slow, her convalescence is sure. So if I can't write better, better, better, every day, don't think things are going wrong and that we are hiding something from you. Mother will mark time for a while, doctor told me to-day, and we won't be able to see that she gains, and we shall probably get discouraged and think her as sick as ever, but when she does begin really to mend, she will do it fast. I don't see that there is anything for us to do but keep everlastingly patient.

"Poor Cousin Anne! I hope she is better now. Give her our love.

"Mother says be sure not to wear your best clothes every day even if you are visiting. And when it's wet, put on your rubbers. The twins are planning to write you to-morrow. The dears do really try to keep quiet, and succeed fairly well for them. And the neighbors swamp them with invitations to eat and play away from home—

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really they do very little here but sleep. It all helps.

“Now cheer up, little sister. The Thayers are backing you to win.

“With love from us all,

“PHILLIS.

“P. S. What is this moonshine about a barred door? I never heard of such a thing at ‘Red Top.’ You must have been up before the gates were unlocked! Cousin Anne would be the last person to lock a door for any sentimental reason. She’s not that kind. P. T.”

So the door had not been closed last summer when Phillis was here. Something had been accomplished; the mystery was dated. But how provoking of Phil to take that superior tone! Precious little she should hear about it after this. And mother must not be bothered. Locked only at night! Was there an hour of the day when she had not tried it? But she had never again seen the headless doll. Once or twice voices had come over the wall, a small lisping treble, a girl’s laugh—such a pretty laugh!—and jolly enough to make you want to laugh too if you could only do it half so well. Who were those people? Perhaps they had moved in lately, and Cousin Anne did not like them. Was that why she had shut

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the gate? Helen knew that she might set forth through the clover any day, climb a low, gray wall or two, and come at the other side of the garden. But that would be sneaking on the secret instead of storming it, full face. For the present she hugged the mystery, fostering it. Not for anything, just yet, would she risk discovering that Cousin Anne had locked the gate to keep those people from stealing her flowers.

And suppose there were another reason. Phillis couldn't know everything. Barring "old unhappy far-off things," suppose some happiness had lately gone out that way and Cousin Anne had locked the door behind it. A book lay on the parlor table on whose fly-leaf was written, "In memory of too fleet a summer." The verses made you squirm inside, and the date was very recent. And Helen, who was as sentimental as most girls and loath to believe the rest of the world less so, shed a tear over Cousin Anne's fictitious heartache.

The puzzle spun itself into her imagination as a caterpillar winds himself up in a leaf. If she had not had it to think about, I doubt if Helen would have stayed through the first week. It was the longest week she had ever known. Through broiling days and sweltering nights the sciatica jabbed and stabbed and tore at Cousin Anne, defended by hot water bottles and yards of itching

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flannel. And Cousin Anne's temper, ground to an edge by pain and sweat, interminable hours of June sunshine and more interminable hours of June moonlight—June, of all months!—flashed now and then with rapier sharpness. Helen liked her for that. The wounds were clean and held no sting, healing quickly, and Cousin Anne was so pathetically sorry after she had dealt them. They gave the girl an odd half-frightened feeling of acquaintance with the hawk-eyed woman on the bed. Cousin Anne never stormed at her when she tripped over a rocker or knocked down a book, and she only laughed when the cup of broth flew from its saucer and in her efforts at recapture Helen batted it quite across the bed. When she talked she enthralled her hearer and when she listened it was with a quiet interest that doubled the girl's pleasure. For Helen loved to read aloud and read well, and the hours spent, book in hand, beside the bed were happy ones.

But other hours came when Cousin Anne was too sick to scold or laugh, to talk or listen, and Helen could only creep with aching thoughts into the consoling sunshine and shutting the door on memory, learn "Red Top" by heart, liking all she learned.

Even here the ogre's shadow sometimes followed her, and when this happened she would go into

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the last garden where the poppies were lifting big scarlet cups and, sitting down on the rustic seat in sight of the mysterious door, begin to make up stories.

It was impossible to be altogether unhappy, sitting so, with her imagination for company. Helen's imagination was a good deal like a balloon bobbing along through the air. It often ran away with her, but then too it saw that she did not lack adventures. Once started in a certain direction, that imagination was very hard to turn; not even barefaced facts could always head it off. Floyd used to say that Helen would run around the block to find an explanation while the real one lay under her nose and she never saw it. She lived much in books, and the stories she made up were apt to follow the lines of her reading.

"If some day I found a key lying on the grass beside the hollyhocks and I fitted it into the lock and it turned," one story began. They all went on to tell what would happen. Sometimes it was a great garden full of gleaming statues and tinkling fountains like a picture in Cousin Anne's room, but, unlike the picture, with children romping everywhere, turning handsprings and doing cheeses, children just the size of the twins and clamoring to be told stories.

Sometimes what happened was a gloomy wood

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and in the grim castle in the heart of the wood, whither she was led by a sprite with a laugh like bubbling brooks, lived a genius more powerful than the ogre. Though he writhed before her into a dozen shapes, fire and snakes and water and wind and toads—Helen loathed toads—she stood her ground and at last the genius told her she had but to command the thing she most desired. Then she chose the banishment of the ogre from “Red Top.” “A hard deed,” said the genius, “but it shall be done if you see the ogre when I have finished with him.”

So the genius and the ogre fought, and the sound of their fighting was like thunder and the crashing of trees and the hiss of escaping steam, and the sight of it was like a flood and a fire and an explosion rolled into one. For the genius went to battle whirling snaky streams of water round his head, and they played on the armor of the ogre, bristling with red-hot needles, until Helen was deafened by the cracklings and blinded by the mist. But again she held her ground until the steam cleared and lying on the earth she saw a blackened misshapen wisp of a thing that looked like nothing so much as a flake of burnt paper.

“Ask again,” said the genius.

Then she chose quick health for mother ; after that college for Floyd, and art school for Phillis,

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and for herself—Helen hesitated long over her own gift, but finally said, "Good temper."

"Because I can get most of the other things for myself, I guess, by and by, except a pretty face. And what good would that do me if I kept on being nasty? Only maybe I'd be good if I were pretty. Well, it's too late now. I've chosen and you can't do over a choice. Now what for the twins?"

The game might have gone on like this for another week if the weather had not taken a hand. It rained. Not a gentle delicate mistiness or even a rough roistering thunder shower, but a downright out-and-out drizzle, sickening, gloomy, persistent. If at almost fourteen you were ever housed for two whole days in an old country place stocked from garret to cellar with chests and cupboards and boxes, you can imagine how Helen might have felt. But a hundred to one, you were not shut in with an ogre.

The ogre spoiled everything. In the absence of the cheerful sunshine he looked blacker and grimmer and more wicked than ever. She could not get away from him. He followed her up attic and sucked all the pleasure out of trunks of wonderful old gowns which her great-grandmother and great-great-aunts had worn when they were girls and went to the governor's ball. He squatted on the arm of her chair in the library

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when she tried to forget him in the Arabian Nights. He clogged the pen with which she wrote her home letter and made it so gloomy that she tore it up and started another.

"I should hope you could do better than that, Helen Thayer, when mother is sick and mustn't be worried and there's trouble enough at home without any additions from you. If you can't be a help at least you can help being a hindrance. So pocket your blues and put on a near-pink somehow."

But the near-pink was so pale and sickly that in despair she sent off a postal card conveying the stimulating information :

"Rainy day. Jo's gone to town. Read all morning to Cousin Anne. Hope it clears by to-morrow.
NELLY."

By the day after when it actually did clear and the sciatica had fallen back temporarily on its reserves, Crosspatch was desperate.

"It's one of those days when Floyd says I see red," she reflected as she brushed her hair. "I've got to do something violent or—burst!"

"I think I shall lie and rest this morning," was Cousin Anne's greeting. "Move those roses so I can see them better, my dear. Thanks, that's right. You have a gift for arranging flowers. And now be off into the sunshine."

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Given her head, like a young colt chafed with inaction, Helen frisked away. She danced through the gardens, not from any fixed purpose, but because she habitually inspected the locked door before setting out elsewhere. Suddenly an idea struck her. She had always known she would do it some day. Why not now? Walls held no terrors for one acquainted with shed roofs and pear trees, one who had abruptly discovered that she could not live another minute unless she knew what was on the other side of the door.

No sound came from that debatable country. A survey through the keyhole revealed a coast clear even of headless dolls. The gardens were also deserted. Dragging the rustic seat over toward the wall, she scrambled to the back of it and swung herself, red with effort, to the top.

A road ran within a few yards of her perch, and beyond the road, smothered in just such crooked apple trees as she had hoped for, cuddled a small gray house.

Helen half rose to sweep her skirts free for more comfortable contemplation and, losing her balance, crashed down on the other side.

The next instant, instead of on placid green grass, she was sitting on something that moved and spoke.

"Geewollikins!" it gasped. "But you knock the breath out of a fellow."

CHAPTER IV

OVER THE WALL

WITH a horrified squeal Helen landed in the middle of the path, rigidly erect. "Goodness!" she ejaculated. "What are you? And—what are you doing here?"

"Hold on! That's my question." A boy a year or two older than she faced her, a boy equipped with steel springs that had popped him to his feet with the suddenness of a Jack-in-the-box. Beady brown eyes twinkled out of a merry brown face as he felt himself with mock anxiety. "No bones broken. Only black and blue spots for souvenirs. We won't arrest you for assault and battery just yet, young lady. Did you rain down?"

"Of course not. I came over the wall."

"Honest? Thought you'd been going for miles by the bump—sort of shooting-star effect."

"I don't think that's very funny."

"Can't crack a smile on it myself. But, I say, what are you doing over the wall?"

"It's my wall," Helen defended, stoutly. "Cousin Anne's, I mean. What are you doing under it?"

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"Come now, don't get huffy. The highway's free for all."

"But the gate is locked." She throttled a growing desire to giggle.

"Sure. That's why you dented me instead of the grass."

Following his outflung hand, she saw a rubber blanket spread on the grass beside the wall; on it sprawled two or three books.

"Moll's work," said the boy. "She's afraid I'll catch my never-get-over, namely rheumics, on wet grass." His eyes rolled impishly. "Sit down and you'll see my why for yourself."

Squatting Turk fashion on the other end of the blanket, he watched amazed delight grow in her face.

"Why, it's a perfect little green hiding-hole!" she said. "With those bushes and ferns screening the road nobody would ever know we were here at all."

"Pretty good little place, so long as a chap can count on the gate staying shut and no queer fruit pitching out of the trees."

Helen laid her head on her knees and rocked back and forth, shaking silently.

"I say, you're not crying, are you!"

She lifted tear-wet eyes and began a wild hunt through her sleeves. "There, I've forgotten my

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handkerchief again! Phil always asks whether I've got one, and now here I am for all her training just as absent-minded as ever."

"Who's Phil?" turning his pockets inside out.

"My sister Phillis. And she doesn't like it one little bit when I call her Phil, either."

He grinned and tossed over a folded square of linen. "My sister's got me well broken in."

"Oh, have you a sister? How old is she? I'm pining for somebody to play with. And isn't there a baby? The voices come over the wall sometimes. Do you live in that cunning gray house with apple trees all around it?"

"Whew! Shall I take 'em in order or go backward?—We do—We have—Twenty or so—Yes. The gray house has held us about a week, those of us that have given it the chance. Father and mother aren't here yet. I hove in day before yesterday, straight from school. The baby's a three-year-old and a handful. And Molly, my sister, is a junior in college—no, hold on, a senior since yesterday, and no end smart. She came up last week with Harold—that's the kid—and put the kettle on. None of us ever saw the place before. I'm Billy, surnamed Holbrook. What made 'em lock you in?"

The girl laughed. At home she avoided Floyd's friends. It was a family joke that little boys and

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old men were Helen's masculine specialties. But the ice was certainly well cracked when you had tumbled spank on to a boy from the top of a wall, especially a boy with such chuckling easy ways and mischievous impish eyes.

"They didn't lock me in," she said. "It's kept locked—I don't know why. And that isn't the reason I haven't had anybody to play with. I'm Helen Thayer, and I'm up here to amuse Cousin Anne—Miss Bates of 'Red Top.' She scares me but I like her. And I hate her old sciatica—I hate it! Your sister must be great. I hope to go to college myself some day. Don't you suppose she could tell me how girls work their way through?"

"She probably could, but I say, you're not going to do that!"

"Why not?"

"You can't have half so much fun. Earning money takes time."

"I'm not going for fun! I'm going for Greek and biology and literature and Italian and ——"

Billy covered his ears. "Greasy grind! Greasy grind! Greasy grind!" he chanted.

"I'm not a greasy grind! I won't be. Don't you suppose I mean to have fun, too? Oh, I've heard girls. I know how some of them talk. You'd think all they wanted of college was the lark. Why, just last spring vacation one of Phil's

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friends was at the house, a freshman somewhere, and I'll bet she'd flunked something, too, for she said, 'Before you go to college you think it's going to be just ragtime, don't you know, and then you find you have to work.' Ragtime! What she wanted was a boarding-school, and she didn't know it."

Billy nodded his head like a mandarin. "Go it, boots! Go it! I'll back you for a grind, sure."

"Then you don't know a grind when you see one. What's this book?"

"Virgil. Acquainted with the gentleman? But why in thunder do you want to earn your living? Dish-washing and waiting on tables, of course. Didn't I say a greasy grind?"

"I hate dish-washing as much as I do sciatica. I'll black boots first. There must be something more—more—scholarly. Those wishy-washy things aren't all there is, I'm sure."

Billy lay back and threshed the turf. "Scholarly! Oh, my soul, scholarly!" he moaned.

Helen watched him haughtily for a minute before burying her nose in Latin hexameters.

After a while Billy sat up. "See here, won't your aunt, cousin, whatever she is, come up to the scratch? The old lady ought to do something handsome to settle this summer's score."

The Virgil shut with a slap. "What a perfectly

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horrid boy you are! As if I'd buy a college education that way! As if anything on earth would have hired me to leave mother and the family! Cousin Anne may do all she wants for Floyd and Phillis, but I mean to stand on my own feet. No props."

A violent sneeze punctuated this declaration. "Thought I got a whiff of pepper," he teased.

The blood fired Crosspatch's cheeks, her eyes flashed. Billy waited, wickedly expectant.

"One—two—three—four—five—six—seven—eight—nine—ten," she remarked. "What were you doing with these books?"

"Working."

"Flunked, poor boy!" she thought. "But he doesn't look stupid. Perhaps he's played too hard—so many do."

A sweet high yodeling blew over the bushes, interrupting her cogitations.

"Molly wants me," said Billy. "Come on up and see her and the kid. You don't have to hurry back, do you, to Cousin Sci?"

The prettiest girl Helen had ever seen in her life, enveloped in a big print apron, was scrubbing the sink in the kitchen of the little gray house. A pair of vigorous dimpled elbows and a spun gold curl capering above a shell-pink ear formed the first glimpse.

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"I want some strawberries for lunch, Billy, and a head of lettuce, but before you go ——"

That was all Helen heard for a while, because just then the girl turned, brush in hand, and the corners of Helen's poor little heart quite crinkled up. For Molly had a face of the loveliest pure oval, lit by great dark velvety eyes, and her wonderful red-gold hair rippled away from her white forehead like the hair of a Greek statue. She was tall, showing, despite the capacious apron, slim and shapely, with a look of wistful sadness about her that made you want to cry. But Molly didn't want to cry. Oh, no indeed! It was only the people who looked at her who felt like that. And she managed to break them of the habit in time, though to this day Helen cannot come on her suddenly without a pricking of the throat.

"It is so nice to find neighbors," Molly was saying blithely when the visitor next perceived meaning in her words. "And such neighbors! Miss Bates won our hearts forever by that dish of ice-cream on Sunday, didn't she, Harold?"

"Cousin Anne—sent—you—ice-cream!"

"If Cousin Anne and Miss Bates are the same. It was so cold and we were so hot! I never tasted anything half as good."

Sitting on the floor opposite an ecstatic brown-eyed baby, Helen stared this new fact in the face.

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Why hadn't Cousin Anne told her about the Holbrooks? Could it be that she would send them ice-cream from her Sunday dinner with one hand and lock the garden gate on them with the other?

The youngster scuttled after the ball absent-mindedly thrown by his new playmate. Billy had vanished on some errand or other. Molly had set the brush in the sun to dry and was now sousing dish-wipers in a fiber pail.

"Don't you hate doing that?" asked Helen.

"What, kitchen stunts? I love them. When I can scrub I'm happy. A rolling-pin is next best, and I don't mind sweeping, but if you want to put me in the seventh heaven," rubbing soap on a grease spot, "give me water to slop about with."

"Really? I didn't know anybody ever liked to scrub."

Molly laughed the lovely laugh that had floated over the wall. "You didn't know me then. I adore it."

"But—how can you?"

"Because I do, I suppose. Why do you like playing with Harold?"

"That's different."

"Not a bit."

"But you're in college, a senior, your brother told me and—do excuse me if I oughtn't to speak

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of it—but isn't that a Phi Beta Kappa key on your waist?"

Molly's hand went to the Dutch neck of her gingham gown. "Oh, that! I remember now it was the first pin I could lay hands on this morning. Zoo gave me that, and a streak of good luck. And Zoo's rather messy, you know. Don't look at me with such big eyes, child. I'm only moderately intelligent. But if I were the greatest shark on the campus I fail to see why I shouldn't like to scrub and study, too."

The ball bounded away unnoticed while Helen digested this new idea. "Then I suppose you like to wash dishes," she hazarded.

"Right!" squinting through a dripping towel at the sun. "But I dispute that monopoly in this household with Billy."

"Your brother!"

Molly's eyes danced. "Billy is a first-rate dishwasher, bed-maker, and cook—lots of boys are. He can, at a pinch, do about everything else that needs to be done in the house. Oh, but I've had such fun this last week! Everything my own way, you know. And after a bout with semester exams how good it seems to plunge into an orgy of housework! We've always summered by the sea before, so father decided for the mountains this year. I know I shall miss my daily dip and the

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splendid thunder of the surf, but it's lovely up here. None of us knew anything about Vermont except that it was a blue blot on the map and furnished mother her Morgan mare and all of us our flap-jack syrup. Father leased the house and I begged for the job of putting it in order. Of course I've had a woman to help and to stay nights until Billy came, and Harold has kept me from feeling lonely. Father took mother to Niagara. Fancy, she'd never seen it!"

"Yeough!" Harold's sharp little yelp brought Helen back to business.

"He won't let you off now," said Molly, hanging up her towels.

Between throws Helen watched the strong shapely hands twinkle about the line. Why had she never noticed how pretty hands could look doing such things? The ball bounded into a corner and Harold scampered after it, returning with a battered doll hanging by one worn arm.

"Wiggy," he announced.

Helen shook the limp right hand of the ragamuffin. "How do you do, Mrs. Wiggy?" she inquired of the black china face.

"Misther Wiggy," corrected Harold. "Wiggy got new head," patting it cheerfully.

"Isn't he a terror?" Molly threw over her shoulder. "The uglier, the dearer—with Harold.

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One night we couldn't find the rascal and I thought the baby would cry himself sick—he sleeps with Wiggy."

"Done!" cried Billy bursting into the kitchen. "How many baskets, Moll? Half a dozen? Come on to the strawberry patch, neighbor. They give you all you can eat. Not this time, Bumps," tossing Harold to the ceiling. "Bumpity Bumps stays with sister Moll."

Away they went up the road, Helen hoppity-skip, Billy ranging in and out of the bushes like a sportive dog.

"Going to call you Seesaw," he announced, returning from one of these excursions. "Short for Cousin Sci's Sawbones. Sci-Saw—See-saw. Like it?"

Helen glared.

"Rather neat, I think myself. Got a lot in it. Nail in your shoe?"

"No!"

"Glad to hear it. You look the way I felt once when I had one."

"I think you're the horridest boy I ever saw."

"One—two—three—four—five—six—seven—eight—nine—ten. Fine day."

"Why'd you count?"

"Why'd you?"

Her shoulders stiffened in haughty silence.

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"Tell a fellow," he persisted.

"You don't deserve to know."

"Probably not. Father says if we got our deserts it would be a pretty hard world. Dead give away for father."

Helen laughed. You couldn't stay angry with those ridiculous eyes grimacing at you out of the soberest face. "Mother told me once that if I could remember to count ten when I was mad I wouldn't explode. There's a time when you know you're going to be mad, and then if you only can remember and want to and count ten or do something like that, you can stop yourself."

"Zip! Corked!" He illustrated graphically. "So you did it."

"Ye-es. But mostly because I knew you didn't want me corked. So I'm afraid it ought not to count."

"Count how?"

"On my blue string." She hesitated. "Mother started me two strings of beads, one the loveliest shade of blue you ever saw, the other black. Whenever I lose my temper I have to thread a black bead and when I've kept it—when I wanted to lose it—I can add one to the blue string. But it's so short! I don't believe it will ever get long enough to wear."

"How's blacky?"

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"It scares me to think about it."

"I've got the dickens of a temper," said Billy cheerfully.

"Oh, I hope it isn't as bad as mine!"

"Yours! You don't know anything about tempers."

She stared at him. "The only good point about mine, mother says, is that I get over it quickly."

"I don't. You can't make me mad easy, but if you do—— Gee whiz! it's done for keeps. I'm an everlasting hater when I hate."

Helen stopped short in the road. "I do believe you're proud of it!"

"Don't know that I quite catch on."

"Why, I mean that you feel sort of grand about it—that you don't get over being mad quick—just as though a nasty bulldog temper was like—like—being clever at electricity or playing a fiddle the way Floyd does. You think it's smart."

Billy's lips puckered to a whistle. "Who thinks she's smart now, Miss Over-the-Wall?" plunging into the tangled roadside growth to investigate a bird's nest.

Helen watched him, visions of possible toads hopping before her eyes. You went down so very far when you stepped off the traveled road. But there was Billy balancing on the fence and calling, "Come and see." Gripping her courage

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tight, she plunged in. Side by side on a rail, they looked down at three eager open mouths.

"The greedy things!"

"Hungry, old chap?" Billy flicked at a gaping beak with a shady twig and cast about for more substantial offerings. "Suppose they'd eat dragon-flies?"

Helen caught his hand away. "Don't touch that pretty thing! When we go the old robins will bring them worms. Listen to the fuss they're making just because we're here."

"I might take one of the kidlets home to Moll," he suggested teasingly. "She'd chloroform him and pick him to pieces for a sight of his internal workin's."

"I don't believe she'd do any such thing!"

"Oh, you don't, don't you? Much you know about Zoo, Miss Seesaw. Wait till you get to college, washing dishes for your living, and cutting up worms and toads to see how they're made."

"Does your sister do that?"

"Sure. She's a crackerjack at it. Say, have you met any black snakes around here?"

"Mercy, no!"

"Big fat ones," pursued Billy, "no little shavers. Eight or ten feet preferred, corresponding girth. Moll's birthday trots along next week and I thought if I could catch her a chunky slithery

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ripper of a black snake, I'd hit the bull's-eye. You needn't pop your eyes out that way, Miss Over-the-Wall. Moll's keen on snakes. Last summer she kept a little chap tied to a chair in her room, had him handy where she could study him. Wait till you see her coming home from a walk trailing steen feet of what you take for brown rope. That's no jolly. Cross my heart. You've got a lot to learn about college yet."

"But—what does she do it for?"

"Trot around with a snake at her belt? To see what they'll do. Sometimes she cuts 'em up. They're right neat inside, Moll says. But, my eye! If you step on a caterpillar—one of the harmless kind—or knock over a bird with a pea-shooter, Moll's in your hair. Wanton cruelty, she calls it. You're just doing it to be mean. T'other's science. And I'll say for Moll that if she finds 'em alive and they're not a bad sort, she mostly lets her snakes go when she's through with 'em. We had one little shaver last summer that refused to take to the bush again and lived under the piazza when he wasn't squirming after Moll."

"I'd like to know how much of this is true."

"She asperses my voracity!" yelled Billy, regaining the road in two bounds.

Gingerly Helen followed. "Your sister doesn't look like that kind of girl."

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"What kind of girl?" he jeered. "Ever see that kind of girl before? How many kinds have you got salted down in your second-story front, Seesaw? Moll's no picture book. Moll's a—surprise party."

Privately Helen assented to this with all her soul, at the same time registering a mental note to be careful where she stepped in the gray cottage.

But Billy was chuckling again. "Moll's treasures don't live in the house any more. Not since a little wiggler curled up for a nap one night last September in mother's stocking. The stocking was hanging on the kitchen bars and Moll herself popped him in there in a hurry when some fellow or other wanted her to go rowing. In the morning mother finds a hole in the pair she meant to put on and sallies out for those in the kitchen." Billy grinned. "Mother drew a line that day and drew it black. Here we are. Pick your hands full, but don't stuff your pockets or you'll be searched."

While Billy bought his baskets Helen wandered into the berry field. Over the long clean rows of fragrant plants bent busy pickers. The sun beat on their cone-crowned flaring hats and deep-hooded sunbonnets.

"I should think they'd broil," Helen said aloud.

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"We do." A girl's face smiled out of a pink calico calyx. "But how can we help it, when the berries ripen faster than we can pick? I've just come on again after an hour's rest. I began at five o'clock. Help yourself. They'll rot if you don't."

Helen sank down beside the picker and began eating and putting in her basket.

"You needn't do that," said the girl.

"I can't eat as fast as I can pick. Do you live here?"

"No, a quarter of a mile through those trees. It's a nice cool walk home."

Helen picked for five minutes and multiplied the time by sixty. "It must be awfully hard work," she said.

"It is hard—most things are that you get paid for."

"Are you doing it for anything special? Oh, I beg your pardon! I ought not to have asked."

"That's all right. I don't mind telling you. With the money I earn this summer and an old empty shed father has promised to let me use, I'm going to raise mushrooms and try to put myself through college."

"Mushrooms!"

"There's a good market for them in the city, and I've been studying and raising them on a small

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scale for a year. People around here laugh at my scheme, but I believe in it and father is willing to let me try. I don't mean to fail."

"And I don't believe you will," cried Helen heartily, watching the deft, capable hands. "But won't you be fearfully old by the time ——" Confusion choked her.

"Not older than many girls. I'll be twenty when I'm a freshman, if all goes well. Maybe that seems old to you. It doesn't to me."

"But why not go now and work your way through? That's what I'm going to do in two years."

"Because I don't believe in dividing myself up like that. When I earn I'll earn, but when I study I don't want to have to take time to make money. I'll economize and do without things and scheme to make ends meet, but I want the whole of myself to give to my college work. You get more out of it, I think."

"That girl's got sand," Billy commented, when Helen repeated the conversation on the way home. "But, I say, do you call raising mushrooms exactly —scholarly?"

Whereupon Helen threw a strawberry at him and the discussion ended in a wild race for the home gate, in the course of which Helen lost at least a third of the berries out of the cup she had carefully platted from raspberry leaves.

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Molly sat on the kitchen steps reading a letter.

"Father and mother are coming to-day at four-twenty," she remarked.

"Thunderation!" said Billy.

Molly lifted her lovely eyes. "I should think you'd be ashamed to look him in the face."

"Ashamed of nothing," growled Billy. A hard, cold mask had slipped over his face, shutting out the jollity.

"Oh, dear!" thought Helen, feeling as uncomfortable as a third person generally does at somebody's scolding.

But it was the old merry Billy who steadied the step-ladder for her to climb back over the wall and handed up the little green cup, refilled from one of the baskets.

"Good-bye and come again," called the brother and sister, and Harold piped in, "'Bye. Come 'gen."

Helen measured the distance to the rustic seat, still where she had dragged it, let herself down by one arm, felt around wildly with both feet, missed the back, and, clutching the cup convulsively, pitched head first into the lemon lilies. Picking herself up, she stood a minute watching red trickles course down her dress. Then she rushed through the gardens and straight up to Cousin Anne's room, her face set soldier-wise to the front.



“I’VE BEEN OVER THE WALL”

OVER THE WALL

"Cousin Anne," she said, "I've been over the wall."

"Over the wall?" murmured Cousin Anne.

"The wall where the locked door is. Maybe I ought not to have gone, but I didn't think of that till I'd got back. Molly—she's the one who looks like an enchanted princess and is Phi Beta Kappa and loves to scrub and has snakes in her room—sent you this rosebud, because it's the first one out at 'Gray Shingles.' And Billy wishes he'd been here Sunday for the ice-cream. I had some strawberries for you that I picked with the girl who's going to college raising mushrooms—I mean raising mushrooms to go—no, I don't mean that either, the mushrooms aren't going, she's going.—But anyway I squashed them getting over the wall—the berries, I mean. And oh, Cousin Anne, you don't mind, do you?"

Cousin Anne lay silent a full minute before speaking.

"What you have done is done, my dear," she said at last, "and no more need be said about it."

The girl's heart gave a great bound. Then it was the book down-stairs! At least it wasn't the Holbrooks. And the morning's excursion was not going to have any consequences. Helen disliked consequences; they were so apt to be unpleasant. But hadn't she a letter?

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The last of these jumbled thoughts slipped off the tip of her tongue at sight of a pile of envelopes by Cousin Anne's bed.

"There are two down-stairs," smiled the nurse.

Helen fled. Phillis's letter she read through twice before glancing at the second envelope. It bore handwriting strange to her and one of those undecipherable postmarks often stamped on trains. But there was no misreading its astonishing contents, which set her in breath-catching bewilderment to staring at the envelope lettered so plainly in an odd clear-cut script:

Miss Helen Thayer

"Red Top"

Was she, after all, in an enchanted castle? For the letter began "Dear Nell," and was signed, "Your Fairy Godmother."

CHAPTER V

ENTER, THE FAIRY GODMOTHER

“ABOUT that matter of the locked door,” said the letter. “Or shall I explain myself first? For a hundred to one you are as shivery and excited to be reading a letter from me as you were when you found the closed gate.

“Of course you knew, dear Nell, that every child is born with a fairy godmother. No? Don’t tell me that girls are brought up nowadays not to believe in such things! Oh, it was only that you never expected to hear from me? I don’t quite like that, either.

“What do you know, goddaughter? Must I begin with the A B C of fairy talk? Some children have two or three of us and a few have more, like the Sleeping Beauty you may have heard of, who found she couldn’t safely draw the line anywhere. And let me tell you now that it is much better to have one good fairy godmother than too many. Everybody has one. If you think some of us lazy or blind or forgetful, think too that perhaps it isn’t all our fault. For there

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are two things to be remembered about fairy god-mothers. You can't see to read our messages without spectacles. Yours? Bless you! You've got them on this minute! Why did you put up your hand? Did you expect to feel the metal bridging your nose? Fairy spectacles haven't any nose-piece and they haven't any glass, but they make all the difference in the world with what you see, as much difference as the kind you can feel made to the girl who had never seen the separate leaves on the trees. She had always supposed everybody saw trees her way—vague blobs of green.

“But I never could have sent you even a message if you hadn't opened the way, and that is the second thing to remember about a fairy god-mother. Some time you will know why, when you went over the wall, you set wide the door for me to come through and talk to you. Never mind now.

“Now you will have enough to do thinking about me with my magic wand and my pumpkin coach and a great many other things that you have never even dreamed about. So pick up your skirts and skip with me

“Up and away
Up and away
Over the threshold to fairy play.

ENTER, THE FAIRY GODMOTHER

“Remember you have only to want me, and if you want me hard enough, I will come.

“Affectionately,

“YOUR FAIRY GODMOTHER.”

If Helen read the letter once she read it fifty times. She almost read it to tatters, and after the last reading it was as much of a mystery as at the first. She read it to make certain that she had read it right before and she read it to assure herself that she had not dreamed it. For when it was out of her fingers nothing seemed more likely than that. It was too good to be true. After she knew it by heart she pinned it inside her dress so that the crisp rustle of its pages might confirm the words that quizzed themselves over and over in her brain.

She felt like one of her own stories come to life. A fairy godmother? Why, a fairy godmother was the same kind of person as the genii in the Arabian Nights. Who could guess what she might not do?

All day the thought of her cuddled in Helen's heart like a dewdrop in a rose. She kept expecting it to evaporate—and it didn't. A timid hand stole under the pillow at sunup. The letter was still there. Oh, bliss and rapture! After that she let herself go. A fairy godmother! A real live fairy godmother!

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The delirious joy of it skipped in her feet, sang in her voice, and laughed out of her eyes. She wanted to hug the whole world, she felt so glad. It was one of those days when nothing goes wrong. What if the washwoman had ripped off two buttons from the blue gingham she was trying to put on and, worse than that, had forgotten to send them home? What if the peonies refused to stay in the big green bowl and came tumbling out almost as fast as she stuck them in? What if Floyd's letter was only a note to say that everything was shipshape and he had been fishing the day before? What if Cousin Anne tired of the book they were reading just when Helen began to be interested and called for something else? It didn't matter. Nothing mattered, except the fairy godmother.

"My dear," smiled the invalid as her tray appeared at the door, "you have been a perfect little streak of sunshine this morning."

And Helen skipped down-stairs to her own dinner with a new warmth added to the glow at her heart.

Eating alone, she did not feel in the least solitary. Too many thoughts were chattering in her head for that. She did not think, "Who is the fairy godmother?" Not for anything in the world would she have thought that. Helen had lived

ENTER, THE FAIRY GODMOTHER

long enough to think it, but she had also lived long enough to know that such thoughts are dangerous. You cannot have a story come alive before your eyes and question too closely who is asking you to play in it. She did not even think as some girls might have done, "I am rather old to care for a fairy godmother." She had told the twins too many bedtime stories about fairy godmothers and had enjoyed them too much herself to think that.

Gradually out of the joyous hubbub in her brain emerged clearly a single recognition: the fairy godmother had something to do with the locked door. Of course she had known it ever since that first reading of the letter—was it not set down in black ink on white paper? But you can know a thing in different ways, and not until now had the connection made a path into the very center of Helen's attention.

"About that matter of the locked door—or shall I explain myself first?"

Excitedly she pushed back her chair and made her way through the gardens. She must, she simply must, take a look at the door this minute. Against the wall of the fifth garden near the entrance to the vegetable patch leaned a step-ladder, a hoe and rake sprawling beside it. Jo had evidently been busy here. Helen lifted the step-

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ladder and, bending a little under its weight on her hip, carried it along the garden path to the locked door. There she carefully set it against the wall and mounted. Not a Holbrook was in sight. The road ran, brown and empty, over the hill. She leaned her elbows on the top of the wall and looked down into the green nook where she had sat with Billy.

How inviting it looked. And, as Billy said, how mysteriously secret so long as the door stayed shut. You could be almost anything down there. The lady of a beleaguered castle long ago who lay hidden in the hazel copse at the foot of the donjon tower, waiting for the rescuer who would swim to you across the turbulent yellow flood of road. Or a troubadour beneath your lady's window—Helen liked masculine parts rather well; they were apt to be more lively than feminine rôles. The lady's father would put you in irons if he found you out. Or a fearless captain with your gallant men at your back waiting for darkness to fling your scaling ladders at the walls of the enemy's fortress.

She threw her head back and looked straight up into the myriad of green leaves that dipped and turned and twinkled, letting the blue sky through. Down there flat on the grass, looking up like this, you could be a bird and go soaring, soaring far off

ENTER, THE FAIRY GODMOTHER

into that blue, blue sky, so far off that you would almost forget how to come back. Helen felt suddenly that there was no end to the things you could do in the green cubby-hole under the wall. But nothing told her what concern it was of the fairy godmother's.

Once more her eyes scrutinized the grass, the ferns, the bushes ; traveled up a tree trunk searchingly ; broke off and jumped to the next.

"Why, how funny !" she said aloud.

Half-way between the grass and the first branches on the side next the wall something had happened to a big oak. You did not notice it at first and you could not see it at all from the hiding-hole, but just there somebody some time had cut a rough figure on the tree. It must have been done long ago, for the oak had tried to grow over the gashes and had partially succeeded.

Helen edged along the top of the wall on her knees until at imminent risk of a tumble she could put out her hand and by leaning down touch with her fingers the rude circle and the triangle inside. But that didn't tell her anything either. It only deepened the mystery. For it was possible that the design on the oak trunk had nothing whatever to do with the fairy godmother. How could it? But then again it might. Had she not written, "Some time you will know

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why, when you went over the wall, you set the door wide for me to come through"?

When Helen returned to the house her dessert was cold. "I didn't mean to be so long, Mrs. Higgins," she mourned. "I just ran out for a minute, but I'll never do it again. And I don't mind cold pudding very much, truly I don't."

"Perhaps," she was thinking, "the next message will go on with that unfinished first sentence. Of course it will."

But it didn't. That is, you couldn't be sure that it did. For the next message was a yellow telegram that the maid laid beside Helen's plate before she had eaten more than half a dozen spoonfuls of the cold pudding. A telegram! The girl's heart jumped into her throat. Could mother—— Fear marshaled a dozen grizzly possibilities before the operator's cryptic scrawl straggled under her eyes in stupefying bewilderment.

"Always look for the mark.

"F. GODMOTHER."

The mark! What mark? The one on the tree? Were there more of them?

"It sounds like what the ads say," Helen heard herself declaring as she pushed back her chair, too excited to eat.

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There was nothing for it but to institute an immediate inspection of all the trees on the place. An initial or two she found, but nothing remotely resembling the encircled triangle on the oak over the wall.

CHAPTER VI

ALMOST A SLIP

OF one thing Helen was certain. She would not tell the Holbrooks about the mysteries that were piling up so delightfully at "Red Top." It was more mysterious to keep them all to yourself. Billy would want to find an explanation, if he didn't simply laugh at her, and Helen loathed being laughed at, while Molly — What would Molly do?

Helen considered the question, dangling her heels over the wall above the green cubby-hole. There was no boy in the cubby-hole this morning. There was no sign of life about the little gray house cuddled in the crooked apple trees. What would Molly do? Why, Molly would love it all just as Helen loved it. Those slim rosy fingers of hers would trace the outline of the mark on the tree with the lingering caressing touch that Helen attributed to all her heroines, and Molly's wonderful dark eyes would flash at the thought of the fairy godmother. No, not flash. Flash wasn't the right word at all. What would happen in Molly's eyes was more like an explosion behind

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folds on folds of velvet. And Molly's lovely low voice that sounded like maple taffy would say, "A fairy godmother! How perfectly delicious to have a fairy godmother!"

Oh, but would she say just that? Somehow the words did not ring quite true on Molly's lips. Anyway, she would like it. She would be so interested that she would forget all about bugs and snakes, if she ever really cared for them. Probably Billy had made up a good deal of that part of his story about Molly, though, of course, having studied so much zoölogy, she had to know something of such creatures. Nevertheless, Helen was not going to tell Molly. She was not going to tell anybody.

Suddenly she woke up to the fact that the road was not deserted. A small determined figure in blue checked "rompers" was trudging sturdily away in the direction that led, if you followed the road long enough, to town. The small person's yellow head gleamed bright as the buttercups beside the road.

Helen felt around for the top rung of the piece of ladder she had seen beneath her feet, and also took the road to town.

"Good-morning, sweetheart," she said.

"Mo'nin'," said Harold briefly, but he smiled.

"You darling!" breathed the girl.

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They pursued their way in silence for a couple of minutes.

"Isn't it a gorgeous morning?" Helen volunteered.

Harold allowed the remark to pass upon its merits, while his feet pattered straight ahead.

"Cousin Anne, poor dear! can't enjoy it. They've got her again, Harold. It's really dreadful when they get you like that. I hope I'll never have sciatica. Would you like to take my hand?"

Harold, however, thought it the better part of valor not to take her hand. You were never sure how you might get turned about if you took grown-ups' hands. He did not explain his reasons. A couple of resolute head-shakings sufficiently defined his wishes.

"It's nice to have company even if the company isn't very sociable," Helen remarked, to the world at large.

Blue rompers continued to forge ahead. She loitered. Presently he looked around and waited. They went on together, side by side in the golden sunshine. A dark winged butterfly, brilliantly circled and banded, flitted across the road. Harold pursued it, clutching empty air, until the butterfly skimmed from the road over the wayside flowers. Brought up against the barrier of grass and butter-

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cups, he stood pointing after the gorgeous wings. "Pitty," said Harold, screwing a smiling little face toward Helen.

"Sweet pretty," she agreed enthusiastically. "A lovely butterfly. Oh, you darling boy! Aren't you one big peach, though?"

The darling boy proceeded amiably.

"Do you know," said Helen presently, "I think it's rather hot to walk to town this morning. I believe I'll just go as far as that big tree where the road turns. I'm going to sit down under it and keep very still, and maybe if I keep still enough, I'll see a squirrel. I saw a squirrel over your stone wall yesterday, and he was coming right from this direction."

Harold remained non-committal. But when they came to the turn in the road there was a chipmunk waiting for them. Helen felt very grateful to the chipmunk. They watched him, still as mice, until suddenly Harold darted from under Helen's hands with a sharp little "Boo!" that sent the chipmunk scampering along the wall and out of sight. Then Helen sat down on a big brown root that jutted toward the road, and after a minute of uncertainty Harold cuddled down beside her. The day was won.

"How is Mr. Wiggy this morning?" inquired Helen.

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After that she did not miss the squirrel. Harold chattered enough for ten squirrels.

"Do you know," said the girl, "I don't think it's quite safe to leave Mr. Wiggy so long alone, after what he did the other day. If I were you, I'd want to know what he was doing now."

So they returned, as happy and determined as they went.

"Hello, where'd you find him, Seesaw?" asked Billy.

"We walked down the road a little way," said Helen.

Molly looked up from something she was busy with on the step and nodded, smiling. Helen caught her breath. Molly was as pretty as she had thought she was. There had been minutes in the last day or two when Helen had been sure she must have dreamed part of Molly's prettiness. But no, here she was in the full sunlight of a June morning and Helen's memory had not played her false.

But there were other people smiling at her; a little brown bird-like woman who pushed open the screen door to take Helen's hands and tell her she was glad they had so thoughtful a young neighbor, and a tall, bearded man who pitched a curl of shaving into Harold's lap and asked Helen whether she would rather have her book shelves stained or painted white.

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"Molly is all for stain and mother for white paint," said the big man as he planed briskly. "Billy wisely sits on the fence. I think mother'd better have it her way, don't you?"

Helen smiled back at him, uncertain what to say.

"So you're on the fence, too," he exclaimed. "Well, well, that's hard on me. The house is divided against itself. What shall it be, mother? These boards are ready for something."

"Stain Molly's," decreed Mrs. Holbrook, "and paint white the shelves for the living-room to match the woodwork."

"There spoke the general," said Mr. Holbrook. "Everybody ought to be satisfied with that decision. No fences for your mother, Billy. See how she cuts the Gordian knot."

"What a lot of books you must have!" cried Helen, eying the pile of planed boards.

"Have," said Billy. "Brought up on 'em, so to speak. Cut our teeth on 'em and sat on 'em instead of high chairs, didn't we, Moll?"

"A pile of them makes a perfectly good seat," said Molly, "when you don't happen to have chairs handy. But Harold's high chair is coming if the express company ever gets it through."

"I'll bet the agent's baby is feeding in it," Billy declared. "Bump's chair would have got here a

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dozen times over if they hadn't side-tracked it for use. Which are mother's, dad? I'll paint 'em."

"You really don't need very much else in a room if you have plenty of books," Mrs. Holbrook was saying to Helen.

Molly laughed. "Mother thinks they make the best wall-paper there is."

"The most homelike, enduring and comfortable paper to live with, Molly. Age only improves them to the sight. Put books into a house and it is more nearly furnished than by anything else you can name."

"I never heard of sleeping on 'em," objected Billy.

"They would be softer than a Chinese kang," Mrs. Holbrook returned. "I'm sure of that."

"Every man, woman, and child ought to have a library of his or her own," said Mr. Holbrook. "I don't care how small it is, let it be the books he likes to live with. Reading public library books all the time and nothing but public library books is like renting your clothes at a pressing club."

Molly's eyes twinkled. "The Holbrook family is now mounted on one of its pet hobbies," she remarked to Helen. "I hope you don't disagree with us."

"I think it's lovely to hear you talk," said

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Helen. "But I have to get most of mine at the public library when I'm home. We can't afford to buy many. Do you really each have a library all your own?"

"Far more seemly were it for thee to have thy studie full of Bookes than thy Purses full of monye," quoted Father Holbrook. "We each own the books we like best and cart some of them around with us. Witness these shelves."

"They look alike now," grinned Billy, "but what they hold will be mighty different. If I met Moll's shelf in Patagonia I'd ask, 'Where's Moll?'"

"People reveal themselves in their reading more clearly than in any other way," said Mrs. Holbrook. "Show me what a man reads and I'll tell you what kind of a man he is."

"Mother's theory would go hard with Moll," Billy chuckled. "I'd defy anybody to recognize her on sight just by looking at the books that are going on these shelves."

"They reflect very clearly Molly's tastes and interests," said his mother.

"What books are going on her shelves?" Helen queried.

"'How to Tell the Birds from the Crocodiles,'" chirruped Billy, "Thingummy on 'What Happened Before Anything was Here,' What's-His-

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Name's 'Wild Animals that Didn't See Me,' another fellow on 'Why I'm Not the Way I Wasn't,' Somebody Else's 'Great Snakes and Little Tadpoles,' all toeing a straight line with Billy Shakespeare, Charlie Dickens, and a bunch like that. Oh, she's got a few that aren't dead thrown in, but mostly Moll likes her specimens of book-writers preserved."

"Don't mind him," said Molly calmly, "but come up and help me put in the books when the shelves are dry. Then I'll show you Billy's, and you can judge which is the worse mixture."

"A mixture is a good thing," said Mr. Holbrook. "You keep wide awake on a mixture. No part of you goes to sleep."

"Ever read 'Last of the Mohicans'?" asked Billy.

Helen nodded. "I wept quarts over the end of it, too."

"Huh!" said Billy. "You're a girl, all right."

"Who didn't care anything about going on a picnic the day that he finished 'The Last of the Mohicans'?" Molly inquired. "Seems to me I remember somebody backed out a few years ago. He'd been pretty keen on the picnic up to the time he finished the book."

"I wouldn't own to a library that couldn't spot

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me that little thing you've got in your hand," hedged Billy.

"What is it?" Helen asked, moving up on the step beside Molly.

"She doesn't know," said the boy. "None of her books will tell her."

And now Helen saw for the first time what Molly was doing. She was playing, actually playing, with what Helen called a "disgusting horrid slithery old worm." It was undeniably a worm, though Molly combated Helen's other charges, substituting such adjectives as "nice dry distinguished young worm."

"Look at his lovely color," she besought. "That delicate apple green. He's a real aristocrat among worms. Did you ever see one like him before?"

"No indeed." Privately Helen hoped she never would see another. How could a girl like Molly like such things? But if Molly did, and it was undeniably evident that Molly liked them, why then perhaps they weren't so dreadfully disgusting, after all. Nothing that Molly liked could really be disgusting, Helen thought. Still she eyed the worm askance.

"He's a lovely color," she admitted. "But I'd rather have his color in something else."

"But I tell you he's a very distinguished gentleman," said Molly. "He's so distinguished that

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his picture isn't in the books, or his description, either, so far as we can find."

"He's not in the rogue's gallery yet," commented the irrepressible Billy.

"And father never saw one like him," Molly continued. "So maybe he's a new species."

"Want him named for you?" persisted her brother. "Molly—ha—molecule! That's what we'll call him. Molecule, a recent acquisition to the fauna of North America, discovered by Miss Maria Holbrook. Reads well—yes?"

"I should think he'd be horribly squishy." Helen still eyed the worm askance.

Billy shouted. "You've an eye to the main point, Seesaw. Only don't let Moll catch you at it, that's all."

"We're going to keep him in this box," Molly explained, "with air holes, of course, and plenty of cool green leaves such as we found him eating, and with glass over the top, so we can watch and see what he does. I'm sorry you don't like him."

Helen hesitated. "I don't dislike him as much as I did. But I'm glad you're going to keep him in a box."

"Hate to meet him in the open, wouldn't you?" said Billy.

Helen acknowledged that she would.

"I'd like to borrow old Mol and put him in her

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room some night," whispered Billy a minute later to his sister.

"Billy Holbrook," said Molly softly, "if I ever hear of you playing a trick like that on any girl, I'll make you wish you hadn't as long as you live."

"What's the harm?"

"It's dangerous, that's the harm. You don't know what it might do to her. It might make her an invalid for the rest of her life."

"Oh, shucks!"

"No shucks about it. I knew a girl at a camp once who was ill for years because some joker put a harmless little snake in her bed. She isn't now the girl she would have been if she hadn't had that scare."

"Pretty wishy-washy to begin with, I guess."

"Nothing wishy-washy about her. Different from you, and from me, too, that's all. Hand me a few more of those leaves, please."

"Now I'm going to chop up another box of books in the shed," Billy announced. "Want to read 'em as they fall, Seesaw?"

Helen went with Billy and spent a happy half hour stacking books as he handed them out, fidgeting and glancing and reading now and then. Nevertheless, all the time she had a feeling as though somebody had stood her on her head and

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shaken her. She could not make the universe come right side up. That a girl with a face like Molly's should like to wash dishes and play with long, fat, green worms was incredible. But she did. Helen couldn't help believing what she had seen with her own eyes. She believed the snake story now; she was forced to believe it. If Molly hadn't had that face—but then Molly had the face. And certainly homeliness did not incline you to like worms. Helen was plain, and Helen didn't like worms. And yet she couldn't help feeling that if she could only get over the surprise of it, she would know that it was actually pretty to see Molly play with a large, green worm. Helen's horizon was widening rapidly.

As it was, she could not keep away from Molly. But when she came in sight of her again, Molly was doing nothing queer at all. Molly was playing in the shavings with Harold. Such lovely straw-colored curls as flew through the air. Hastily Helen deposited her books and ran to join them. A three-cornered battle raged joyously, punctuated by Harold's happy yelps and the gay laughter of the girls. Billy joined for a while, and there were four until Mother Holbrook wanted some strawberries and Billy flew off on his bicycle to get them.

That reminded Helen of the fact that it might

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some time be necessary for her to go home. A cordial invitation pressed her to stay to dinner, but she heroically refrained.

"I think I ought to go and see how Cousin Anne is feeling, I truly do. I'd love to stay. You know I would, don't you? Only she really was feeling so horrid this morning."

"Come again," said Mrs. Holbrook, "and come often. You and your cousin are our nearest neighbors. My regards to her. Molly, did you thank Miss Bates for the ice-cream?"

"I sent a little note, mother."

Molly walked with Helen to the gate. Had one of her own heroines come alive beside her? She was so happy it almost made her sad. Through the gate and across the road they went.

"This is Billy's nook, isn't it? What a dear little place!"

Helen looked at Molly, and her heart suddenly beat so fast she thought it would suffocate her.

"Would you—would you come up on the wall?" she asked shyly. "There is something I'd like to show you."

"Of course, I'll come," said Molly. "What fun!"

Up they went, Helen leading the way. Molly stood, erect and graceful, on the garden wall. "Isn't it fun to be above the earth!" she cried.

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"You feel so free and light, as though you could spread your wings and fly. I wonder what kind of a birdwoman I'd make. It must be glorious to swoop and wheel and soar with nothing but sky around you. Oh, that garden! It's the most wonderful garden I ever saw. I don't wonder you wanted me to see it from here."

"It wasn't that," said Helen. "I mean that wasn't the reason why I asked you to come up. You will have to turn around and stoop down, like this, and then ——"

A delighted cry broke from Molly's lips.

Helen sighed contentedly. "I hoped you'd like it," she said.

"Like it! My dear, why didn't you tell me before?"

"I haven't known about it myself very long."

"Oh, but you should have spoken at once! Forgive me, I'm so excited."

Helen beamed. "That's all right then. I thought you would be, but I wasn't quite sure. Isn't it the loveliest mystery?"

Molly nodded. "It's poetry. What's that Tennyson says about the little flower in the rock? You know it. But we mustn't sit here—or, yes we must, too. Only I wish father could see it. I must get him."

"Does he like such things?"

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“Loves them. Knows all about them. If I ever know one quarter as much as father does—— There ! it moved. I’m afraid it will fly before I can get him.”

“Fly !” gasped Helen. “What—what are you looking at ?”

Her own eyes, lovingly bent on the mysterious carving on the oak trunk, turned to Molly Holbrook’s. Molly’s eager gaze went above the mark ; she did not even see it. Swiftly Helen’s followed the direction of Molly’s absorbed look to—a great, pale green winged thing clinging to the oak’s bark.

“It’s a lunar,” Molly whispered. “A perfect lunar moth. I never saw one so big. Oh, you beauty !”

Helen blinked. The moth was very beautiful. Helen had never imagined anything with wings so lovely as this thing. Her admiration of its beauty seemed to set Molly back again in her rightful place as a girl. But it was not what she had expected Molly to see. It was not what she had brought her to see. Helen fought a sharp, silent battle with herself before she spoke.

“Shall I go for your father ?”

“Oh, please. Then I won’t have to take my eyes off it.”

Helen need not have feared for the safety of her

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mystery. When she came back, bringing Mr. Holbrook, Molly met them in the road.

"It flew," she said. "Down this way. I couldn't keep it in sight from the wall. But I think we can find it, father."

They did find it, after a long search, and Helen was thanked and praised in a way she found embarrassing under the circumstances. She did not explain. How could she tell Molly that she had seen the wrong thing, the thing Helen had not known was there to be seen? After all, Molly had seen the thing she ought to have seen, the thing she had eyes to see.

"And I never saw it at all," Helen said to herself as she climbed back alone over the wall, "though it was right there as plain to me as to Molly, you'd think. I ought to be grateful to that moth. It kept me from telling. And I don't believe Molly would have understood. Molly is good for everything else, but I don't think she's good for mysteries."

In the iris garden Helen stopped a minute to drink in the beauty of the soldier ranks that on every side wheeled and marched in lines of color. A sense of regained safety blessed her. The secret was her own, the more her own for having come so near to being shared. And meanwhile Molly remained the prettiest girl she ever saw.

CHAPTER VII

BY EXPRESS

THE spell of the fairy godmother held. Not even a call from two insipid looking girls with blue china eyes who inconsiderately broke into Helen's further cogitations over the tree and the telegram and stayed and stayed until she was convinced they didn't know how to get away, banished her good nature.

"We're going to have a party, day after to-morrow," said the taller of the girls, whose name was Frink, "and mother said we must be sure to ask you, because our sister knows yours—the one who's been up here so often."

"Oh, May!" breathed the shorter, "that doesn't sound right. We really wanted you ourselves"—to Helen—"I mean we would have wanted you if we'd only known you."

"I'm sure I didn't say anything, Belle. Yes, we've been trying to get here for a week, but we've had company and all sorts of things going on. We've really been very gay," giggling gently.

"I shall like to know the girls here," said Helen cheerfully, "if you're all as interesting as one I

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found yesterday picking strawberries. Who is she? The girl who plans to raise mushrooms, you know, and go to college."

The Frinks stared.

"Oh, you must mean Sarah Stuart!" May began to laugh. "She will hardly be at our party."

"I should say not!" agreed Belle. "But—er—Miss Thayer couldn't be expected to know, May."

"I'm not Miss Thayer. That's Phil. My name is Helen. No, I suppose the strawberry season isn't over yet."

"Mother doesn't call on Sarah Stuart's mother," explained May Frink. "They're awfully poor and live so far out of the village, and—well, Sarah isn't in our set at all."

"Stuck up prigs!" thought Helen. "Who do you go with?" she asked.

"The names won't mean anything to you," said May, "until after the party." She rattled off a string of Janes, Dorothys, Sues, and Alices. "They're the nicest girls in town; mother's very particular about our friends. So you needn't be afraid to come. And the boys are simply grand. Do you like boys?"

"Don't know 'em much except Floyd. Some of 'em look jolly and some of 'em don't. There's a jolly one up here, Billy Holbrook."

BY EXPRESS

"Billy Holbrook! Oh, do you know him?" in duet.

"The girls are all wild over him," chirped Belle. "I do think he's the handsomest thing!"

"Do you? I'd call him rather plain, bright-looking, of course. But his sister,"—Helen's eyes sparkled now. "Have you seen his sister?"

The Frinks laughed.

"Of course. She's a raving beauty, but—queer! Oh! Oh! Why, she came into father's store one day last week carrying a lizard in her hand. In her hand, mind you. A lizard she'd picked up somewhere. And she asked father for an empty box or something to take it home in. She lined the box with leaves and punched holes in the top. And when he told us at supper, father said it reminded him of when he was a boy and had his room running over with lizards and frogs and mice and—and—all sorts of nasty things. She and father got quite chummy talking about them. Did you ever hear of such a thing for a girl to do?"

"You learn all about animals like those in college," said Helen calmly.

"But to carry them about with you! I don't think it's quite—ladylike."

"Oh, May!"

"Well, I don't. You wouldn't touch one yourself, Belle, and you know it!"

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"Dish-washing is ladylike, isn't it?" Helen asked. "Molly Holbrook loves housework."

"Dish-washing—ugh! It spoils your hands so," said May.

"Then you don't like it? Fussing around in nice soapy water with one of those long sticks with string on the end?"

Belle smoothed her waist carefully. "I see you're an admirer of Miss Holbrook. We won't dispute her face. But, May, really oughtn't we to be starting back?"

"Now don't forget. Three o'clock, you know. So glad you can come."

Helen drew a long breath as the carriage disappeared down the drive. But a party is a party, and few well-regulated girls fail to muster a thrill or two over the idea, however little the fact may prove to their taste. "Maybe the other girls will be different. You never can tell," thought Helen as she ran up-stairs to consult her wardrobe.

"If you have a lot of clothes or if you aren't everlastingly messing up the ones you've got," she remarked to the closet at large, "a party must be perfectly simple. Or even if you're home where Phillis can mend you," lifting down her organdie, "and iron you and put a little briskness into your limpness." The organdie wilted on the bed. "That's because I stayed out in the dew night be-

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fore last, I suppose. Phil told me to be careful and always lift it up and avoid dampness. Oh, oh, what a mess! Maybe I could wash it—do you wash organdies? Well, anyway it's only my second best, but ——”

A dubious hand reached after the very best and brought out a blue flowered muslin. “You're perfectly good-looking in front,” she mused, holding it by the shoulders at arm's length, “even if you are one of Phillis's made-overs. Most of my clothes were hers some time or other. Only ——” she whisked it around, revealing a jagged tear that ripped a long swathe through the bachelor's buttons at the back. “Nasty old thing! And I'm no good at mending a place like that. It runs pretty straight though, and skirts are so skimpy now—why not cut it right out? I'll bet I could. But first ——”

She dived again into the closet.

“One soiled linen and not another thing built for a party. Where are my scissors? Oh, but wouldn't Phil have a fit to see me!”

Snip—snip—snip went the scissors. After them coursed Helen's needle, gathering up the ragged edges into a neat straight seam. “For I can do plain sewing,” she reflected cheerfully, “even if I don't lay out the plan just like a dressmaker. Phil would rip out that whole breadth and fit a

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new one. But I haven't any pieces, and even Phil couldn't do it without pieces. How nice and quick this goes! I'll try it on and then run down and look up mark in the dictionary. Maybe there's some queer old meaning that will give me a clue to what she wants me to do. Having a fairy godmother makes life tremendously thrilling."

The dress dropped over her head, fingers flew at every other button, and Helen whirled around, mirror in hand, before the long glass set in the closet door.

"Oh, dear!" she ejaculated, the straight up-and-down lines deepening between her eyebrows. "Why—why, it doesn't look the way I thought it would at all!"

For a minute she stared in silence; then the hand-glass pitched into the middle of the bed and Crosspatch stalked to the window. "Nasty old thing!" she muttered. "I've a great mind not to go to that old party, anyway. I can't if I haven't any clothes, can I? Oh, dear—I wish I had a new dress! Not a dress made over from anybody else's, but brand fire, spick and span, straight-from-the-shop new!"

Something rustled under the arm against which the girl leaned. Slowly the frown lifted; tiny crinkles of pleasure puckered the corners of her

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eyes; her lips curved. "I expect there'll be plenty of girls there with new dresses," she said dreamily, "but I'll bet there won't be anybody else who has had a letter from her fairy godmother!"

Crossing the room, she plucked the mirror from the bed and surveyed her disappointing back. "Of course, it isn't right, but my blue sash will cover the worst—I'll make the ends hang down long. And perhaps people will think it's a new style, too new to have reached Vermont. But I must remember to face front every minute I can. What's that, Margaret—Jo ready now?" to the maid at the door. "Why, how slow I've been! Tell him I'll be down in just a jiff."

It was a breathless, pink-cheeked girl who three minutes later sprang to the seat beside Jo for the drive to town. It was a girl more breathless and pinker-cheeked who jumped out after an hour and rushed up to Cousin Anne's room, both arms clasped around a long brown bundle.

"Oh, Cousin Anne!" she cried, "we stopped at the express office for your books and they hadn't come, but the man said there was a package for me. For me! Why, I thought he was joking. I never had such a thing in my life! But he said, wasn't I Miss Helen Thayer, and I couldn't deny my name printed right out in black on the wrapper. It's a box! I've squeezed it, but it won't give a

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bit. And fat! Oh, look at it! Look at it! Who do you suppose could have sent it? There's a label with the name of a firm in New York, but I never even heard of them and—— Is it all right for me to open it, Cousin Anne?"

"Certainly, if it is directed to you. Let me see. Yes, the name is plain enough."

"Here, Cousin Anne?" Helen's hat flew one way, her linen coat another. "Oh, please may I open it here? We always open things together at home. It's so much more exciting having somebody to look on."

"Yes—yes. Of course. Don't you want to cut that cord?"

"I do, but I won't. I'd get into it too quickly. Phillis says if you untie every knot and roll up your string, the thrills last four times as long. And the tighter the knots," picking desperately, "the better Phil likes them. You can guess all the time about what's coming, but just as soon as you get inside, you know, and then—— Where are those scissors, Cousin Anne? I'll never get into it this way. Why, I'm shaking just like a—corn-popper!"

Rip! Slash! Cord and wrapping-paper fell away. A box emerged, long and white and daintily monogrammed. With trembling fingers Helen lifted the cover, cautiously peeped between folds

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of tissue-paper, and dropped in a white little heap on the floor.

“Why, child, what’s the matter?”

“Oh, Cousin Anne, I’m scared.”

“Helen Thayer, if you don’t tell me in half a second what’s inside that box ——”

Slowly the girl pulled aside the paper. Lips parted, chest heaving, she poured over the box.

“Helen ——”

“I think—I almost think—it’s—a—dress!”

“A dress! And you expect me to wait —— Aren’t you going to look at it?”

Helen put out excited hands and drew them back hastily. “It can’t be for me, Cousin Anne, it can’t be!”

“Then why on earth should it be addressed to you, child? But of course ——”

With a little cry the girl dived into the box and brought out an oblong card of heavy white paper. The card bore no word of print or writing, but illuminated on one end was a little figure that made you think of a seed of thistledown, so dainty and ethereal and imperceptibly in motion it seemed. Two butterfly wings of the most delicate colors in the world enfolded it and between them the face peeped out, shy and whimsical and gently smiling.

A lovely color flushed Helen’s cheeks. “Always look for the mark,” whispered the telegram

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in her ear. "Perhaps it is meant for me," she said.

Cousin Anne lay and watched her lift from the folds of rustling tissue something white and sheer and delicately embroidered that as she held it up developed sleeves, waist, and skirt.

"O-o-o-h!" breathed the girl softly.

"A very pretty gown," commented Cousin Anne, "and looks as though it would fit. Quite apropos, I should say, of the party. Now do you mind telling me what this is all about?"

The glow deepened in Helen's face.

"I—I think," she faltered, wishing she need not speak at all, "that it must come from—from my—my fairy godmother."

"Indeed? That's interesting, my dear. You are in communication with her, then?"

"Don't laugh! Oh, please don't," Helen implored. "I haven't told Phillis—I haven't told anybody. Phillis would think it was her duty to try and find some stupid easy explanation and I don't want any explanation. I—just—want—the—fairy godmother." Hastily she ran over the story of the letter and her wish.

"Laugh?" echoed Cousin Anne. "My dear, I have no desire to laugh. Personally, I have always believed in fairy godmothers, though mine never saw fit to write to me or forward embroid-

ered batiste gowns by express. You must put it on and see —— But a fairy gift ought not to need human stitches, though I was going to say perhaps we could manage one or two in case the fairy guessed wrong anywhere.”

Helen turned such radiant eyes on the couch that its occupant blinked.

“Cousin Anne, I’d like to hug you!” she cried. “You say the darlindest things! I believe inside we’re lots alike, after all.”

“Perhaps we are, my dear. I’ve noticed something of the sort myself. It was kind of her to put in her photograph.”

An ecstatically contented girl slept under the morning-glories, and woke to read to Cousin Anne, speculate about the fairy godmother, and dress for the party. The oak tree did not entice her at all to-day. Its puzzle would keep. Could the fairy godmother have meant that kind of a mark, too? Anyway, she meant this, this dear delicious utterly lovely card that stood even now on Helen’s dressing table in the place of honor beside mother’s picture.

With all her thinking she still tried to be careful not to carry her speculations too far. When an over inquisitive little thought popped up in her brain and said, “Who?” as it had started to say before, she promptly pushed it down. But now and

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then it got ahead of her. That old friend of mother's who sent the yearly box of half worn clothing and who had stopped at the house last spring and when she went away left a perfectly good blue serge for Phillis and a promise of something later for Helen, had not looked like batiste from New York. But then she had not looked like a fairy godmother, though she had lovely eyes and was better company than any girl Helen had ever seen, and wrote fascinating letters in a hand which—yes, now she came to think about it, Mrs. James's writing surely did look just the least little bit like the fairy godmother's. As it would look, Helen decided, if Mrs. James had tried deliberately to disguise the way she naturally wrote. They both made the same kind of g's and t's, and of course since Mrs. James insisted on hearing twice a week how mother was, she had also heard of Helen's visit to "Red Top." But how had she known about the locked door? Had Cousin Anne told her or had she found it out for herself when she was up here visiting, where she and mother and Cousin Anne used to play together as children?

"Stop!" ordered Helen's will imperiously. "You said you didn't want to know. Now look what you've done."

"I'll forget," whispered the girl, blushing. "I'll forget just as hard as I can."

BY EXPRESS

"Then you mustn't try to guess," will said bluntly. "It's a game, a perfectly lovely game. Play the game."

Dressing for the party in the way she dressed for this party was something Helen had all her life longed to do. The gown fitted like a charm. One tiny stitch Mrs. Higgins took in the skirt didn't count. Perhaps it was a charm, thought the girl, set to last just so many hours, and after the party she might find in its place only a vanishing bit of white cloud, a handful of cobwebs and a bunch of wilted daisies. But anyway it didn't go by the clock, or, if it did, the schedule had been omitted. The fairy godmother had said no word of an hour when, Cinderella-wise, she must be home. Helen almost wished she had. It would be so much more exciting.

And then at last she was ready, all but her dress, as sleek and shining and clean from her braided hair to her little white shoes as brushes and soap and water and irons could make her. And Mrs. Higgins was slipping *it* over her head and buttoning it up behind to make sure she didn't strain the delicate cloth trying to fasten it herself, while Helen, speechlessly happy, stood in front of the mirror. But it wasn't the curllessness of her hair or the plainness of her eyes or the curious disposition of her nose that she was look-

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ing at—it was her dress, the wonderful fairy god-mother's wonderful gift.

“Dear me, I'd like to go to a party myself,” cried Cousin Anne when she saw her. “Put on my dust coat, child. It's too big, but no matter, driving. Now good-bye and have a good time.”

And Helen had a good time. As she reviewed the occasion afterward that was the most surprising thing about it. She never remembered having had such a good time at a party. It seemed to run itself. The girls were so pleasant and the boys were so easy to talk to that you found yourself chattering away just as you would at home.

It was a party with games set out on little tables sprinkled over a big lawn. You found your partner by splicing a broken quotation, and after that you moved on from table to table as you won, or stayed where you were as you lost. Helen's partner was a big overgrown boy with the best intentions in the world and the stupidest way of carrying them out. The two had joined fortunes for the afternoon by rhyming:

“Pussy said to the Owl, ‘You elegant fowl!’”

But if Sam Bentley was owlsh, Helen soon decided she would have to revise her notions of the bird.

“Hello,” cried Billy Holbrook, joining them with May Frink at the author's table. “You

here, Seesaw? Good! Get home without brain-ing anybody the other day?"

"I had the best of reasons why," laughed Helen. "There wasn't anybody to brain."

But if he had not been able, quite without knowing it, to borrow a rosy reflection from her own unfadeable cheerfulness, I am afraid Helen would before long have wanted to brain her partner. Players came and players went, but the Owl and the Pussy Cat hung stolidly at the author's table, while he distributed cards right and left and threw away her choicest secrets with the agility of a blunderbuss. At the fish-pond, where by main skill she finally succeeded in dragging him, he rose to the hook nobly and baited his fish with a rapidity that fairly shot them on to anagrams. There they stuck tighter than ever, and there Billy and his hostess, whizzing on their jubilant course, caught up with them again, and Helen had to sit and tuck in her smiles with Billy's naughty eyes teasing and grimacing while his face held steady as a clock.

But then a whistle blew and Belle Frink came around gathering up score-cards and two or three ladies began to spread white cloths on the little tables.

"Everybody change partners," sang out Billy, "and run around the lawn!"

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Snatching Helen's hand, he was off, the rest following helter-skelter after a minute of surprised stares and giggles.

"Talk about twaddle!" Billy growled. "Queer bunch, isn't it?"

"Why, I thought they were quite nice."

"You did! Jumping Jehoshaphat! Maybe you're having a good time this afternoon. Oh, I say, even though you were knocked silly over Moll, I didn't suppose your head was as soft as that!"

"Soft as what? If you call it soft to like a party that you've been invited to, I don't. And if you don't like it, you'd better keep still."

"Beginning to grow wings, Seesaw?"

"You can't make me mad, Billy, hard as you try. You can't! You can't! I don't believe I'll ever be cross again as long as I live, because — Oh, Billy, I've got a fairy godmother!"

"A what!"

Gleefully Helen dropped into her old chair. "I feel as though I belonged here, I've sat in it so long. She gave me this dress, Billy. How is my head now?"

"The F. G. did that? What's wrong with it? The dress, I mean. You didn't mind?" turning to May Frink, who came panting up, a hand at her side. "We did it at—where was I when we

ran around like that? After finishing the games, you know."

May Frink smiled at him. "Mind?—Oh, dear no!—It was a cute idea—I think.—So new—to us up here—in the wilds."

"That idea was pretty fresh," Helen informed him half an hour later. "What made you try to pass it off as second-hand?"

"Thought she'd take it better so. Now don't get huffy, Seesaw. A fellow knows when he's had too much girl. When did this fairy godmother racket pipe up?" Refreshments had been stowed away and the guests were streaming across the grass toward the house. "Does she hand out any little thing you happen to want?"

Helen told him of the letter. "And then the dress came. And that's as far as we've got."

Billy's sceptical eyes twinkled over her flushed face. "You do take it all in, don't you?" he teased. "I say, don't brain me. Honestly, I'd like an F. G. myself about now."

The note of sorry earnestness in the last sentence caught her ear. "Don't you think you'll be able to pass them off?"

"Pass what off?"

"Your exams. Isn't that what you're working for? I thought——"

"Oho! Thought I d flunked, did you? Guess

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I can take care of my lessons a while longer if I get the chance. It's only"—there was no smile now in Billy's eyes—"I have a little interview with dad coming off in a day or two that I'd like to cut."

CHAPTER VIII

IN THE HIDING-HOLE

FLAT on her back, her head to the oak beyond the wall, her feet to the path, Helen lay looking up—at the leaves and the sky? Not a bit of it. At a big beautiful stooping creature with blue smiling eyes set rather far apart in a cool green face. Now green is not the usual color of a lady's complexion, but if you have never lain flat on your back under a tree and looked up, you are not competent to speak on the subject. Of course it was a face. It couldn't help being a face when the eyes watched you so hard. There was one to the left where a branch crooked to let the sky through; the other was almost straight over your head. Looking up steadily at the softly moving leaves, Helen felt the lady slip an arm under her and begin to rock, rock, ever so gently.

From far down the road, drawing farther away every minute, sounded boys' voices. Billy was off for the afternoon. When she climbed the wall she had seen Molly and her father disappearing together over the hill. Harold would be busy with his nap. There was absolutely nothing to lure

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Helen away from the delights of the green hiding-hole.

She sighed contentedly and, turning on her side, let her eye slip along the turf to the hedging bushes. When your head was low like this, how tall every grass-blade looked! Suppose you were really only as high as your eyes came now. Suppose this short grass reached to your waist and the ferns grew high above your head and the bushes towered as tall as trees; what a queer place the world would be! As though you had been alive when those huge fern forests the books told about used to cover the earth. Straightway Helen began to explore the green nook from this new point of view, a tiny adventurous Helen, climbing a fern frond as the real Helen would climb an apple tree, dodging an upstanding hoary dandelion to avoid bringing down a white shower on her head, braving the dark alleys between the roots of the encircling shrubs.

And then the thought of Molly swam again into her ardent beauty-worshiping heart. Molly with the sun on her hair and her hat in her hand speeding lightly up the hill, as though the very air loved her. Helen moved over on her back again, clasped her hands under her head, smiled at the two blue eyes looking down from the tree, and immediately the still green space grew big with

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splendid deeds. Was there anybody so well fitted as Molly to run away with a person's imagination? Molly was Helen of Troy. Molly was the princess of a besieged castle. Molly was the everlasting Cinderella of the world. The brown dusty road echoed to the feet of heroes, heroes led by Helen, dauntless, invincible. How they fought and bled and died at Molly's feet, to be revived only to do it all over again. Tears welled up in the girl's eyes and rolled salt and silent down her cheeks as she viewed their glorious fates. This was better than being the princess yourself—oh, much better.

"Sir Knight," said Molly, "in this high tower I am immured by that wicked lord who has stolen my lands, here to stay until I wed with him, which by my troth as a high born damsel will I never do."

"Lady," cried Helen in armor at the tower's foot, "of that wedding shall you have no need. Keep a high heart and trust to Harry Hotspur."

Thereupon Hotspur, having lent his name, lent also his temper and at the head of his waiting men fell precipitately on the objectionable lord who with an army at his back now put in a timely appearance. The grass was crushed under the press of men. The bushes reeled back from the fray. But still through the defile that led into the plain poured relay on relay of the enemy. On they came, swords flashing, battle-axes lifted high, a

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wave of steel rolling on the Lady Molly's champions. With her name on his lips Hotspur pricked to meet it. The wave shivered at his onset, broke and ebbed. But not yet was the field won. Quivering with excitement, her clammy hands gripping the grass, Helen saw the wicked lord rally his forces, saw him with a dozen knights hurl himself on Hotspur where he rode alone.

"To me!" shouted the knight as he spurred to the encounter. Five men went down under his hand before he closed with the hated tyrant. Then was such a fight seen as even Helen had never achieved before. It raged with all the doughty detail that much history reading could supply, and when it ended the wicked lord was dead. His men carried Hotspur to the foot of the tower and somebody unlocked the door and let the princess out.

Lady Molly stooped over Hotspur where he lay, and his blood crimsoned the hem of her gown. She took his limp hand in hers. "My noble deliverer!" quoth she, weeping. "Sir Knight, was it for this you fought?"

"Lady," said the knight, "all is well since you are free. The word of Hotspur is redeemed."

Then Molly ordered somebody to "look to his wounds" and—— But Helen never followed her heroes far after what was required of them had

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been accomplished. Now she lay still on the grass under the wall, her muscles tense, her mouth and throat dry, her chest heaving a little after these strenuous mental exertions. Slowly she divested herself of the imaginary Hotspur. It had been a rather lively afternoon for a warm summer day and a good deal had happened in the small green nook under the wall. She was not sorry to lie quiet for a while and let the real world soak into her brain gradually. So often she had to put away her imaginings in a hurry.

That was the beauty of this place; it was so entirely your own when Billy was away. But not even Billy knew it all. He thought he did, but he didn't. Only from the top of the wall could you see the cut in the oak bark, unless you squeezed yourself in between the wall and the trunk, and Billy, she was sure, had not thought as yet to do that.

But Helen did this minute, just to see how much room there really was and to run her fingers over the scar. While she did it she wondered for the fiftieth time what the circle and the triangle meant. Somehow she did not like to ask Cousin Anne. Yet how could the explanation have to do with the locked door? This mark must have been set in the tree many years ago, while the door had been locked only within a twelvemonth.

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Some day when Billy was off again she would come here and make up stories about it all. Already she could feel them pricking in her brain. But the sun was too low now. Billy might be back at any time, and besides she had imagined enough to-day. Imagining things was like reading books. When you had finished one, you liked the next better if you waited before beginning it. And the mark on the tree, she felt instinctively, was worthy of a fresh fancy.

No, she would make up no more stories this afternoon. She would go and see what Cousin Anne was doing. Perhaps she could read to her again. But first she would walk along the wall and see if there were any more hiding-holes as good as this.

There were not. Bushes grew thick between the road and the wall. Here and there clematis and wild grape stormed the brick and clambering riotously over dogwood and elderberry sprawled victoriously across the coping. Over their twisted stems Helen stepped high, careful not to trip. After a thorough search she stopped by the oak and, squatting on her heels, devoured the delectable nook below with complacent eyes. It was the one perfect and complete spot of its kind the whole length of the wall.

Just how what occurred next came about, she

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was never afterward quite sure. She had reached down to give one last pat to the mark on the tree and she was drawing back. Perhaps she had not been quite so careful as usual in her manœuvers. For the next minute she found herself clawing wildly at nothing; one arm was going down, down, down, and when it stopped she seemed to be a kind of human vine bridging the space between the wall and the oak, her arm buried to the elbow in the heart of the tree.

"Why, it's hollow!" she gasped when her breath came again.

Transferring herself wholly either to the wall or the oak was no easy matter, but as difficulty of any sort served only to spur Helen's spirit, she was not long in surmounting this one. In the tree you could investigate. Obviously, therefore, in the tree she ought to be. And thither with much scrambling she betook all of her that was not there already.

It was hollow; at least there was a hollow in it. Passing seasons had choked the opening and green twigs had hung a screen before it. But when accident had discovered it to you, you could only wonder why you had not found it before.

Gingerly at first, more and more fearlessly, Helen's fingers felt about inside the oak. What a perfect post-office it would make! Had somebody

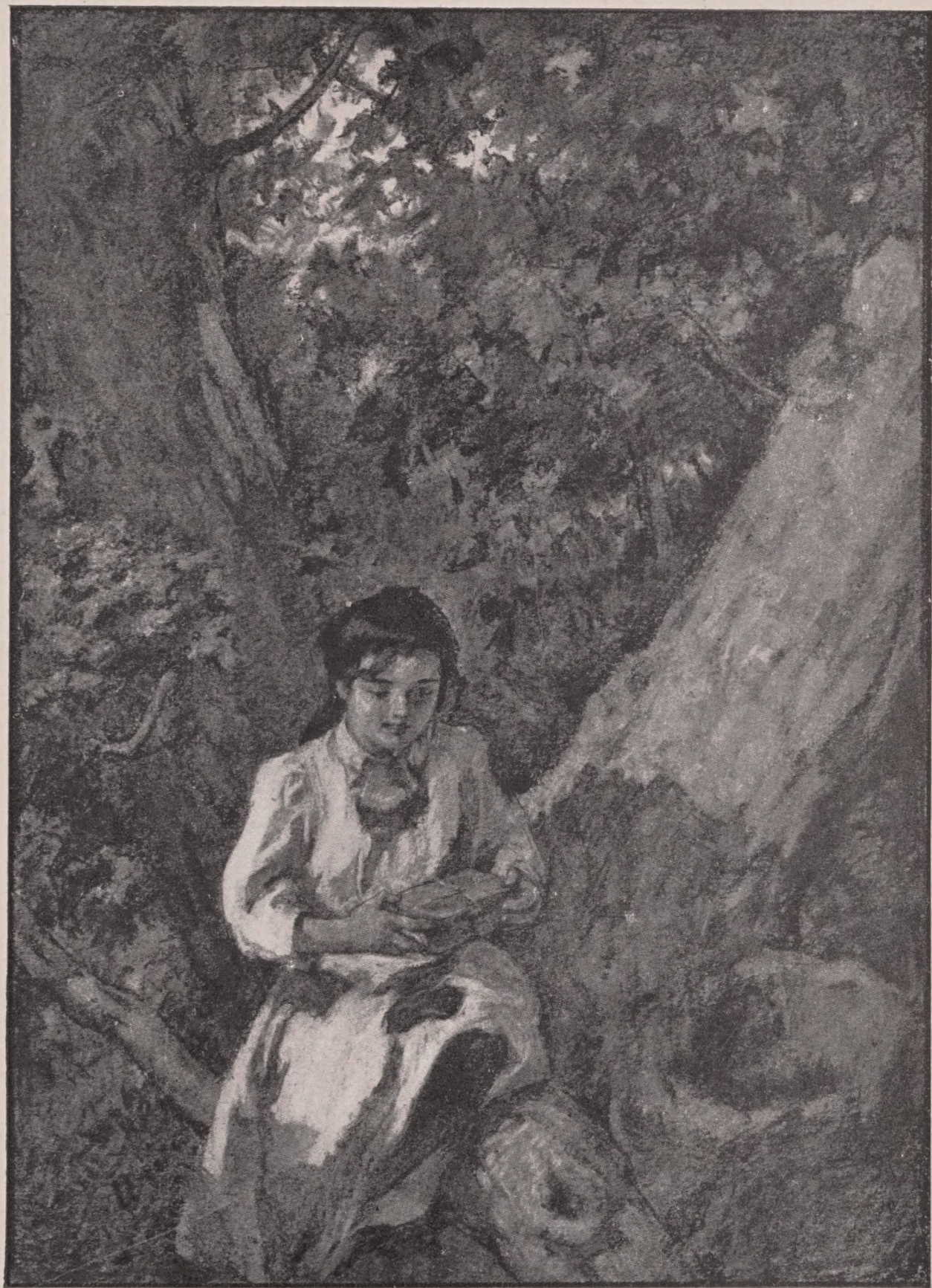
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used it so once and put the mark on the trunk for a sign? But how far did the space go? To the ground? Hamadryads lived in oak trees. "Suppose, just suppose," whispered Helen's whimsical brain, "you should come on a hamadryad now!" "Then I'd say," retorted Helen's ready tongue, "'Dear postmistress dryad, have you any mail for me?'"

But at that very minute she jumped so hard she nearly fell off the branch she was sitting on. The hamadryad had not spoken. It was not a voice that startled her. It was a touch, her own touch on something in the tree. Groping in the hollow trunk, Helen's fingers had closed on a solid thing that would move. Breathing short and fast, she gripped it in both hands and drew it out, a queer oblong something trailing something else after it at the end of what looked like half a foot of fuzzy gray string.

And then she saw the something was a box, a tin box, but so encrusted and eaten with rust as to be almost unrecognizable. It thumped and rattled a little when she shook it gently, giving out three or four different tones of rattle. The string was mouldy catgut tied around the box and holding to it a small flat leather case, heavily coated in its turn with mould.

Helen dusted her fingers on a leaf and picked at



SHE GRIPPED IT IN BOTH HANDS

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the knot. So the tree had been used as a post-office ! Was this a part of its mail, forgotten and never delivered ? But why ? What could have happened long ago to halt traffic so suddenly ? Long ago ? These things looked as though they had been here forever. She opened the leather case. Within lay a packet wrapped in fold on fold of oil silk. With trembling fingers Helen slipped aside the coverings. A sealed envelope lay flap upward in her lap. She held her breath a minute before she turned it over.

“To be opened, together with the attached box, by the first person who finds them after the year nineteen-thirty.”

Twice Helen read the words before she quite understood. “Nineteen-thirty ! Nineteen-thirty !” she cried. “That is years and years and years away. I’ll be grown up and old and ——— Why, maybe I’ll be dead by nineteen-thirty ! Maybe by then I won’t care about looking in the box. Maybe I’ll even have forgotten all about there being a letter and a box.” She stared unhappily at the round faded letters of the superscription. “Why couldn’t it have said nineteen-ten ?” She even twisted the envelope about and squinted at it through half-shut eyes in a vain attempt to turn the three into a one. Stubbornly the date remained nineteen-thirty.

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Then temptation came to Helen. Temptation sat on the branch beside her and whispered in her ear. "Nobody would ever know," said temptation. "Whoever put these things here must have gone away long ago and forgotten all about them. It's no harm to peek, if you leave everything just as you find it. And how do you know somebody hasn't peeked before?"

"I don't believe that," said Helen. "But do you really think I might?"

"Of course," temptation said stoutly. "What's the harm?"

"It says nineteen-thirty," Helen demurred.

"Oh, if you don't care to look!" said temptation. "If you don't want to know what is in the box and what the letter says and who put them here and why they've been hidden so long and why it says nineteen-thirty on that envelope ——"

Helen slipped the slender point of an oak leaf under the flap of the envelope at the upper left-hand corner where the mucilage had stopped. "I wish I had Billy's knife," she thought.

"Take it up to the house and steam it open over the teakettle," said temptation. "Or tear it now. You can write another envelope, you know, that will look old enough by nineteen-thirty."

Helen's little finger followed the point of the oak leaf. For two full minutes she sat staring

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at the letter in her lap. Then her finger slipped out from under the flap. "I can't," she told temptation. "Maybe nobody else would know, but I'd know. And I'd despise myself all the rest of my life if I did it. This isn't nineteen-thirty and nothing can make it so, and whoever put these here said to wait till then."

Sadly she rewrapped the envelope in its delicate covers and returned it to the leather case. Exactly as it had been tied before she retied it with the mouldy catgut. After that she felt carefully to make sure there was nothing more of an exciting nature in the hollow space within the oak and put back the letter and the box together with the leaves that had hidden their resting place from roving eyes. When she had satisfied herself that nobody would find the hollow in the oak unless he tumbled into it as she had done, Helen went up through the gardens to the house.

As she went she smiled to herself. She could never have imagined, she thought, even if she imagined every day through the whole summer, anything so surprising about the marked tree as what she had really found there. "But it would be mean to peek," she reassured herself in the lily garden. "Besides, if I did that, I'd know. And now —— Why, now I've got more than forty hundred guesses. I can make believe something

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new every day, and it will always be right, just as right as the maybe I've made up last. Only if I don't ever know anything at all about it really ——" She halted in front of this new and disagreeable idea. "How shall I ever stand that!"

A lily unfolding by the gate nodded at her and Helen nodded back happily. "Why, of course!" she said. "When I can't endure not knowing any longer, I can ask the fairy godmother."

CHAPTER IX

AN OLD ATTIC

THE attic at "Red Top" was a very enthralling place. The minute you opened the door it seemed to take you by the hand and draw you in and say, "Come and play with me." There you were in the midst of all that you had ever dreamed an attic ought to be. Two great chimneys ran up through the roof, and backing against the chimneys were tall cases of drawers and deep-bodied chests. Trunks, big and little and middle-sized, of every date and pattern, from queer little round calfskin great-grandmother trunks to big lumbering Saratogas, skulked under the eaves. Hulks shrouded in sacking shouldered each other at one end.

"Beautiful furniture it is, too," Mrs. Higgins had told Helen, "as you can see very well if you lift the covers. All rosewood and mahogany. But where can the poor lady put it, with the house full already?"

At the other end a cavernous sofa, minus a leg and shedding its vitals through rents in its green sprigged cloth, held out inviting arms. A rocking horse bereft of a tail leaned against it in a way that

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betokened other losses. From the rafters depended skates, snow-shoes, strings of dried corn, and sundry many-colored bags, some of them as capacious as that of the Swiss Family Robinson. Many little square windows gazed out into the tree tops, windows that were delicately curtained with spiders' webs. The spiders' webs gave the attic just the right air of age and disuse and long accumulation, though Helen knew very well that the webs themselves had not curtained them long. Beside one of the windows a big wing-chair, still gay in faded turkey red, fairly shouted for a girl and a book and a rosy cheeked apple and rain pattering on the roof.

The rain was pattering on the roof now, but the apples were not ripe, and Helen had combined the book and the chair more than once. To-day she wanted something different. Speculatively she loitered about the attic. What should she do? She had read to Cousin Anne all the morning and now Cousin Anne was taking a nap.

"Do anything you like this afternoon, my dear, with anybody you like, wherever you like," Cousin Anne had said. "I'm sorry it rains so much, though rain makes the corn grow. Do you think you can manage somehow?"

Helen had declared she could manage beautifully, but how should she make good her words?

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She would have liked to climb up on top of the wall and sit down facing the oak tree and wonder and wonder who put it there and why the box wasn't to be opened till nineteen-thirty. But even as the thought came she realized that, after all, she would not care very much for that to-day. She was temporarily, just temporarily, tired of wondering. Besides, she had to be careful not to scrutinize the oak too openly. Billy might notice something. And Helen did not wish Billy to notice anything. Besides again, it was raining.

What should she do? There was plenty of excitement lurking all around her in the trunks and chests, but to-day she did not feel like getting at it alone.

"I wish Phillis were here," she remarked to a particularly knobby white bag, "Phillis and the twins. Of course Phillis is older than I am and she thinks she must be dreadfully dignified, but I don't believe that you ever grow so old or so dignified that you don't love to dress up."

At that an idea jumped into Helen's head. It set her eyes sparkling and her cheeks flushing.

"Would she come?" she debated with herself. "Cousin Anne said I could have anybody, and you can't pick berries in a rain like this, at least I shouldn't think you could. But how shall I find out?"

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Apparently there was only one way to find out, and that way Helen took with brief delay. She could act with great swiftness when she had once made up her mind, and falling rain held no terrors for her. It was rather fun in rain coat and rubbers, on her head a cast-off but still fresh-looking straw sailor she found on a peg in the back kitchen, to splash through the puddles, along the garden paths, over the wall, and up the hill, meeting little rivulets of water running down. Little rivulets of water ran down Helen, too. They dripped off the brim of her hat and coursed down her coat sleeves and she laughed for joy and took a couple of skipping steps that sent small fountains of mud jetting over her boots. Why, why didn't people go walking in the rain without umbrellas? She laughed again and lifted her face blithely to the touch of the raindrops.

A gesture of Sarah Stuart's arm made in the berry field days ago furnished vague directions, but she found the house.

Sarah Stuart herself opened the door.

"Oh, I'm so glad you're home," said Helen. "I thought you couldn't be picking berries in the rain, and you're not trying to raise mushrooms either, are you? Because if you're not busy, I do so want you to come home right now and dress up with me in the attic."

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"I'd like to very much," said Sarah Stuart. "But, if you don't mind, where is 'home'?"

Helen blushed. "That's just like me," she lamented. "I always blunder right into the middle of things." Briefly she explained. "And Cousin Anne is asleep, at least I hope she's asleep, but the attic is gorgeous—you love attics, don't you?—only it needs somebody besides me this afternoon. I mean, I seem to rattle around in it like one pea in a whole big pod. You'd better bring an extra pair of shoes, my feet are soaking now. There are the most bee-yeautiful clothes to dress up in. I've been longing for somebody to do it with me."

Together the girls splashed down the road which Helen had splashed up alone. Helen's tongue wagged as fast as though it had been two tongues. Sarah Stuart put in a quiet word now and then, but her eyes smiled.

"Don't you get tired of working all the time?" Helen queried. "I should. I could work five days, but six—I wonder whether I shall have to work six when I get to earning my college course."

"I don't mind," said Sarah Stuart. "The truth is I guess I don't think much about it. I just do it, that's all. But it is fun to have a holiday. A half holiday," she corrected herself. "I picked nearly all the morning."

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"In the rain?"

"It didn't begin to rain until nine o'clock, and the ripe berries would have rotted if they'd been left on the vines."

As they came in sight of "Gray Shingles" Helen had another idea. She eyed Sarah inquiringly.

"You aren't in college yet, so I don't know that you can tell, but do you suppose a college senior would care to do such a thing as dress up?"

"I had a notion they liked to do it very much," said Sarah Stuart. "If you mean, would Miss Holbrook care to come with us, I'm inclined to think she would."

"You know her?"

"She's been in the berry field."

"Isn't she lovely?"

"Inside and out."

"We'll ask her," said Helen. "There's a white brocade trimmed with gold that I know never had anybody so pretty as Molly inside it."

When Molly said yes, Billy said yes, too, a contingency Helen had not counted on.

"But I didn't ask you," she objected.

"I'll overlook that little omission," said Billy. "There's nothing to do over here, and I'll bet I can find something worth looking at up in your attic—no white thingummies, either."

So the little procession of three girls and a boy

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trailed through the gardens and up the stairs to the treasure house of the attic. And there ensued such an orgy as none of them had ever in all their different lives participated in before. The very good reason was that none of them had ever before had such an attic to carry on an orgy in. Even Helen, who had investigated some of them, had no idea the trunks and chests and bureau drawers held so much faded glory.

There were gowns that Molly declared must have been worn when Cousin Anne was a girl, gowns with draped skirts and funny little tails to the waists, trimmed with rows and rows and rows of black velvet ribbon in varying widths.

"I shouldn't have cared to be the dressmaker who sewed them on," said Molly.

There were gowns with close-fitting straight waists and voluminous gathered skirts, gowns with tiny baby waists and scant straight skirts, gowns with pleats and ruffles and overskirts and flounces, gowns of velvet and satin and muslin and silk and stuffs that the girls lacked names for. There were cloaks and mantles, capes and dolmans.

"What in the world are these things?" Helen demanded.

"Hoop-skirts!" said Molly promptly.

"And here are hats—bonnets, I mean," announced Sarah Stuart.

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Molly reached across Helen's shoulders. Then she made a dive in Sarah's direction for a poke bonnet that looked as though a whole flower garden had been shaken over it. Swiftly she insinuated her slim skirts into the hoops. Over her head she slipped a pink silk patterned in hair-line stripes. The wide flounces ballooned gloriously above the hoops. Deftly she tied the strings of the poke under her chin, thrust her arms into a many-seamed peacock blue satin jacket, too tight across the chest, and drew a pair of yellowed mitts over her hands.

"Can't I put on that cerise bow somewhere? The flaunting thing under your hand, Helen. And a shawl. I must have a shawl. That's it, Sarah. The white fringed silk with the embroidered roses."

The next minute she revolved before a couple of laughing girls.

"Did anybody want to see a bit of color?" she inquired.

They laughed the more.

"I think these were made to be worn by a girl with red hair, don't you?" pursued Molly.

"It's a gay rig," said Sarah Stuart.

"Think of a church full of these pokes on a June Sunday," said Molly, "every poke accompanied by its big flat bouquet of spice pinks strung

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on thread. Didn't you know our grandmothers always carried spice pinks to church?"

"I wish we did," cried Helen. "How perfectly dear of them! But, Molly, what made you know how to get into it—the hoop-skirt, I mean?"

"College," said Molly. "There are a good many things you learn in college which aren't entered in the catalogue. I was in a hoop-skirt play last year."

But here Billy stalked into view, Billy whom the girls had quite forgotten, but who had been busy at his own devices in another quarter of the attic.

Helen gave a little jump when she saw him. "Oh!" she gasped. And then, a minute later, "Why, it's Billy!"

"Of course," said Billy. "Who'd you think I was?"

"I don't know," said Helen. "A picture in a book, I guess, come alive."

"One of the old Dickens illustrations," Molly declared promptly. "Billy, you're a dream."

"Sure thing," said Billy cheerfully, surveying his odd length.

For Billy was clad in a long and skin-tight pair of trousers of a pale and languorous yellow hue; a resplendently flowered silk waistcoat covered his manly chest; a long-tailed blue cutaway coat of

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quaint pattern was thrust back to allow his hands access to his trouser pockets ; his chin was perched on a collar that flared on either side like white wings ; while the ends of a green silk tie stood out rakishly below it. On his head perched a very tall, very slim, very round "stovepipe" hat.

"Turn around," ordered Molly, when she could speak.

Grinning, Billy revolved.

"You're a fop," said his sister. "A macaroni. Only macaronies were before your period, I think. A dandy of—1850? Somewhere about then."

"I'm a guy," said Billy, "that's what I am. Would you think a fellow'd even go to the barn in this outfit?"

"He'd strut up Broadway in the fifties and think he was the whole town," Molly corrected him, "if Broadway was the street for dandies to strut on when those clothes were worn. Oh, I wish your attic was somewhere near college, Helen! It would be a mine to the Dramatic Club."

Sarah Stuart's voice interrupted them, an eager, breathless note running through its usually cool tones.

"Oh, girls! Look here."

Sarah held a drab-colored cloak in her hands, very heavy, very serviceable, very old.

"It was wrapped in tissue-paper," she said,

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“with a white linen bag around that. And there’s a paper sewed onto the bag.”

“This cloak was worn by Agatha Allen,” Helen read, bending over the yellow letters, “on her wedding journey which she took by pillion from Boston. She was the first white woman to come into the Beaver Valley.”

“Why, Agatha Allen was my great-great-great-grandmother!” Helen exclaimed.

“She was a strong woman,” said Sarah Stuart. “It was she who drove off the Indians when they attacked the Allen cabin once, with her husband away.”

“How’d she do it?” Billy inquired.

Sarah looked at Helen. “You tell the story.”

“But I don’t know it myself.”

“The Indians crept up in the middle of the afternoon. It was all wilderness about here then, miles and miles of forest with clearings around the few cabins, and the cabins none too near each other. Somehow the Indians knew, or thought they knew, that Mr. Allen was away. They were a scalping party, she could tell it by their paint. And she opened fire. She was alone with the children. Timothy was the oldest—ten. He took one side of the cabin and she the other. Nancy and Robert loaded the guns for them. Mary quieted the little children. Agatha Allen could shoot like a man, better than some men. The Indians

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thought they had been mistaken and drew off. When a bigger band came, Mr. Allen was at home, and so was his brother. After that the Allens built a stockade and all the families near took refuge within it in time of need."

"Good for Agatha Allen!" was Billy's comment. "Say, Seesaw, can you shoot?"

Helen had thrown over her shoulders the old cloak and now stood, fingering it proudly. She enjoyed having an ancestor like Agatha Allen.

"No," she said regretfully. "I wish I could."

"If I could find a 'bow 'n' arrer' and a few feathers we'd have a scrap, if you could shoot," Billy proclaimed. "Suppose there are any of Pa Allen's things about?"

"Were you thinking of reproducing the trip from Boston?" Molly asked.

"You wouldn't waste that hobby-horse, would you?" returned her brother.

Sarah Stuart chuckled. "I guess it would be as hard to ride that hobby-horse as to come pillion all the way from Boston," she said.

Helen broke in on the talk. Truth to tell, she had not heard the last few sentences.

"Why don't we dress up and act out things that really happened before Cousin Anne? She's having a stupid time, and I know she'd laugh and laugh to see Billy, and ——"

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"Oh, I say!" Billy retreated rapidly toward his improvised dressing room.

Molly and Sarah Stuart looked at each other.

"Do you think, when Miss Bates is so ill ——" began Molly.

"I'll go ask the nurse," said Helen. "To-day hasn't been one of her bad days," she flung back from the stairway.

The nurse asked Cousin Anne, who had waked from her nap and was now resting on a couch in her sitting-room. Cousin Anne professed herself delighted at the prospect, and even went so far as to tell Helen where Billy would find his "bow 'n' arrer," and Helen the flintlock she would need to complete her costume as Agatha Allen.

Then there was excitement in the attic. More rummaging ensued, heated debate on parts and costumes, cues and action. Laden with "properties," the four descended the attic stairs. Billy was turned loose to choose his own dressing room; the girls swarmed into Helen's room, showering bed and chairs with a rainbow mass of bonnets, gowns, and mantles.

Somewhat later into Cousin Anne's sitting-room marched Agatha Allen in Puritan garb, her cloak about her shoulders, her flintlock in her hand. Intrepidly she gazed on what she informed the spectator was "primeval forest"; fearlessly under

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her shading hand, she scanned the borders of her little clearing, "for signs of ravenous beast or wilder man."

"All's peace," quoth Agatha Allen. "I will now hie me to my wheel and spin, that when the goodman of my house returns he may find cause wherefore to praise his wife."

With this she retired behind a table and began issuing commands to "Timothy," "Robert," "Nancy," and "Mary."

A fearsome object was the Indian. His war bonnet bristled with feathers, his tomahawk—suspiciously like the meat cleaver—whirled dreadfully about his head. He came skulking through the furniture, bow in hand. By snaky détours he neared the table. With a blood-curdling yell he rose to his feet. He rushed forward. "Crack!" spoke Agatha Allen's flintlock. The chief dropped to his stomach, wriggled back to within cover of a chair and discharged a flight of pasteboard arrows against the table.

"To your post Timothy!" cried the intrepid mother.

"Bang!" said Timothy's musket. The voice was oddly like that of his mother's weapon. The two proceeded in duet, briskly.

Grunting, the Indian withdrew. Whereupon, wrapped in a great cavalry cloak, her hair under

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her collar and a steeple-crowned hat on her head, Sarah Stuart entered, an axe in one hand, a musket in the other.

"I come from reclaiming the forest," she proclaimed. "My home still stands."

"Thanks to your brave wife, Agatha Allen," said that lady modestly, appearing from behind the table. "While you were far away, the wily red man fell upon us, but I repulsed him."

"Noble woman!" breathed the happy husband, opening his arms.

Ping! Ping! A couple of pasteboard arrows whipped against the ancient cloak and the cavalry cape.

"Dead, both of you," said Billy's cheerful voice. "It doesn't do to be spoony outdoors when red men are about."

"That's not fair," cried Helen. "If anybody's dead, you're dead."

"Dead? I'm coming for your scalps now."

"You won't get mine. It doesn't end that way at all."

"Run along, Billy, and get into a white man's skin," Molly commanded. "You're a little late in the day to improve on colonial history."

At that Helen laughed, and the tiny lines, that had come so near puckering her forehead, smoothed themselves out.

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The next company that swept into Cousin Anne's sitting-room was a very elegant group, no less personages than the girls who long ago attended the governor's ball. Molly with high powdered hair, gowned in the white and gold brocade, was as lovely a sight as Helen had pictured her.

"But don't stay long," she besought as they tripped down-stairs. "The thing is so tight I can't breathe."

Sarah Stuart wore garnet velvet, and Helen was deliciously happy in a pink satin that was as small for her as the brocade was for Molly, but whose tightness she endured without a murmur for love of the pink satin slippers that matched it. With much waving of great fans they curtsied and paraded and plumed themselves, until at last Molly began, without any music, but with every movement full of grace and meaning, to dance the minuet.

After that Billy and Molly did a scene from Dickens together, improvising where they forgot what the characters really said. And then the girls bloomed into hoop-skirts that gave them no end of trouble to manage but looked very quaint and old-fashioned, as they undeniably were. There was a major's uniform in the attic, but Billy absolutely refused to put it on, telling Molly he

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had made a big enough guy of himself already. But the girls went on and on through gown after gown, the fun running higher and higher, until suddenly Sarah Stuart declared it must be time for her to go home.

Cousin Anne would not hear of anybody's going home. Tea was waiting down-stairs, she said, for four. She had already sent word to "Gray Shingles." After supper Jim and Helen would drive Sarah home. And she hoped they would all come again soon.

"It's been the nicest rainy day I ever knew," Helen told Cousin Anne contentedly when she kissed her good-night. "Isn't Molly the loveliest?"

"Just that," said Cousin Anne. "I like Billy, too. And Sarah Stuart is a fine girl."

"I wish all girls were as nice as Molly and Sarah," sighed Helen.

"It takes all kinds to make a world, my dear."

"Yes. I suppose it does. But what kind of a world would it be if they were all nice kinds?"

"I never had the chance to find out," said Cousin Anne, "though I incline to imagine it might be rather tame. And remember some people probably like the kinds that you and I don't."

"Ye-es, maybe they do," Helen assented. "But I don't see how they can, do you?"

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"No," said Cousin Anne. "It's very mysterious."

They both laughed at that.

"It isn't nice to compare people," Helen told herself as she brushed her hair that night. "And I did have a good time at the party. But how much better a time everybody would have had if the Frinks were like Molly and Sarah Stuart. And Molly isn't a bit like Sarah, either."

Her thoughts, traveling back to the party, paused on a chance recollection.

"I wonder what Billy meant about his father. Molly said something the first day I saw her, too. Doesn't Mr. Holbrook know that he's flunked?"

CHAPTER X

CROSSPATCH AGAIN

MOLLY, deftly whirling a fat little string mop in one hand, with the thumb and forefinger of the other adroitly snatched plates from a steaming pan of suds, while Helen wiped them and Billy sat on the chest by the door and jeered.

It being Molly's birthday, she ought not by rights to have had any woes, but somehow or other Helen could not shake off a feeling that "Gray Shingles" was under a shadow deeper than any cast by the apple trees. Perhaps it was all her imagination, but nothing seemed quite as usual inside the little house. Between jeers Billy whistled the particularly I-don't-care kind of whistle Floyd employed, when he wanted to impress somebody with an idea of how happy he was. Genial Mr. Holbrook, generally as full of jokes as a porcupine is full of quills, had shut himself into his study. And fascinating Mrs. Holbrook had hidden her quaint brownie-like little person up-stairs with Harold, who was suffering from an attack on the

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cookery jar conducted surreptitiously yesterday afternoon.

That was it, of course. The baby was sick, and the picnic planned to celebrate the day had had to be given up. But if it were not for Harold and if they were not all so polite about it, Helen would have thought the whole family had managed to get out on the wrong side of the bed that morning. As it was, in spite of the lure of pretty hands whisking in and out of white suds Helen almost wished she had climbed back over the wall after delivering the armful of long stemmed pink roses which she had cut herself, picking out the very prettiest and thinking that after all they weren't half so pretty as Molly. You see she judged the Holbrook family by herself, and she had been inclined to blame Harold severely for the failure of the picnic.

"Molly," Father Holbrook abruptly appeared in the kitchen door, "what do you say to joining an exploring party of two?"

"I'd say yes," answered Molly promptly, "but how about Harold?"

"Asleep, and mother says we might as well take to the woods."

"Run along, Moll." Billy slid off the chest. "Seesaw and I can finish the dishes."

"Yes, indeed." Helen swallowed a lump in her

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throat. Not for worlds would she by look or accent have hinted for an invitation, but certainly this turn of events was not what she had expected.

"I'll wipe," said Billy, laying hands on Helen's cloth.

Molly yielded the dish mop. Helen twirled it briskly and dived after a plate as she had seen Molly do.

"Ouch! Ouch! It's hot."

"I say, let up on that! What do you mean by slopping those clean dishes? Just to make me work?"

"It goes over so easy," she apologized, eyeing the dripping plates in dismay.

"Thought you hated washing dishes," teased Billy, when the mop began gingerly to move again.

Helen concentrated her attention on the swirling suds. How fast could she move her mop and still avoid flooding the table?

"Didn't you tell me something like that?" he persisted.

They were at the pantry dishes now. She lifted a big buttery yellow bowl and lowered it cautiously toward the pan. Almost at the water line it slipped and plumped out of her hands with a splash that raised broadsides of suds.

"Bunnywhickets!" Billy landed in two leaps

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at the porch door and began frantically to wipe his face. "Why didn't you tell a fellow it was coming? Doing dishes with you is as bad as getting into one of those joke gardens they have in Europe where a chap can't stir without turning a bath on himself."

"Oh, Billy, I didn't mean to!"

"I'll bet there isn't a dry dish on that table," Billy proceeded. "Here, you just take a cloth and help wipe 'em over."

Penitently she obeyed.

"Pass the word when you're ready to let go next time," he ordered, "so I can get outdoors."

"I'll never touch another dish," she wailed. "You finish them, Billy."

"Not on your life." He backed abruptly. "Don't be a quitter, Seesaw. Up and at 'em! Pike's Peak or bust! Maybe we'll keep on all day, but it's worth seein'. Catch me believing a girl again! She hated washing dishes, did she?"

"A person can change her mind," Helen rejoined with dignity.

"Don't be too sure," warned Billy darkly.

"Anyhow, I've changed mine."

"You've changed your mind. My eye, but that's good, Seesaw! Moll's done it for you, you mean."

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"The Frinks don't like washing dishes," shutting her teeth on a hot retort.

"And between being in the Frinks' company and Moll's, you'll take Moll's? So will I every time. Just the same you're a Mollycoddle, Miss Over-the-Wall. And a Mollycoddle is a fellow or a girl or anybody who likes a thing or thinks he likes it just because Moll does."

"I'm not!" cried Helen. "I don't either! I ——"

"Go it!" grinned Billy. "Get in all over. Say, but you're red! It takes Moll to turn 'em upside down and make over their little opinions for 'em, so it does. Without stirring out of her tracks, too."

Deliberately Helen wrung out her dish mop, emptied the soapy water in the sink, and rinsed mop and pan in clear, as she had seen Molly do. Calmly she put away the dish-pan and hung the mop on its nail. Serenely she washed her hands.

During these operations Mrs. Holbrook came into the kitchen, smiled at her, and went into the pantry to beat up a birthday cake.

Billy pranced after his mother, returning with a little pan which he set on the stove. "You and I'll frost Molly's cake," he announced cheerfully.

"I'm going home," said Crosspatch.

"Oh, come now, don't be a mucker. We'll do

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‘Molly’ in pink frosting, with little candles around the edge and all the other flummyjubbles we can think of.”

“Sorry.” Helen wiped her hands.

“But who’ll play with me if you go home?”

She pretended not to see the really beseeching little grimace of Billy’s eyes and climbed resolutely over the wall.

Undeniably the day was turning out very badly indeed. The picnic had fallen through and now she had quarreled with Billy, just because he had said she hadn’t any mind of her own. And why had Molly done this to her? Because Molly was pretty.

“Oh, dear!” said Helen aloud. “It must be terribly nice to be pretty!”

Disconsolately she sat down on the rustic seat and an idea, a mere seed of an idea that had dropped into her mind three days ago when she showed Molly the gardens, finding everything now right for growing, sprang up quicker than Jonah’s gourd and shaded her. In its gloom she forgot that she had a fairy godmother; she forgot that she was never going to be cross any more. Just because she had gone so very high she now went very low.

The idea said, “You don’t belong at ‘Red Top’ at all. You’re an interloper. Like the ogre, you don’t fit.”

CROSSPATCH AGAIN

The more Helen listened to it, the more she believed the idea. Hadn't she the evidence of her own senses? Phillis fitted and Molly — How well Molly fitted! The mere sight of her standing in the gardens was so right.

Suddenly she thought of a way to put the idea to the test. All the ecstatic dream-like happiness of the past week might have to crumble, but if it did nothing would ever deceive her again. Anyway, she would know.

Slowly she pulled herself off the rustic seat and dragged leaden feet along the paths and into the house. Out of the closet came the fairy godmother's gift and out of her gingham gown wriggled Crosspatch. Standing well away from the long mirror, with careful fingers she worked at the buttons, slowly, very slowly. When she had fastened enough for the experiment she took a step forward and swung together the closet door.

For a long disillusioning heart-sick minute the girl in the room stared at the girl in the mirror. The magic was gone!

"You are!" she cried. "I knew it, but I hadn't dared see. You thought, stupid, if you wore a pretty dress you'd be pretty too! But you're just as homely as ever."

It was Crosspatch who explained to Cousin Anne half an hour later, with a wrinkle in her forehead

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and more than a suspicion of a flounce in her voice, that the baby was sick and the picnic had been given up. "But why?" she kept demanding in a tempery undercurrent to the very dull book that Cousin Anne insisted on hearing. "Why am I plain, and Phillis pretty, and Molly more than pretty? Why? Why? Why?"

And then the answer came—if you can call it an answer—as it always did with a suddenness that made her jump, as though she had spoken out loud instead of only thinking thoughts in her very own secretest soul where nobody could get at them except a fairy godmother. That very noon the postman brought another envelope addressed in those fine queer stumpy letters.

"Why did you think that was a picture of me?" the letter began. "Did you really suppose I looked like that? Perhaps it is the way I'd like to look or the way I think I ought to look to fit the part, but didn't I tell you distinctly it was just a kind of trade-mark, a guarantee that the goods are of genuine fairy make? Any little winged thing would do as well for a symbol.

"A face—what's in a face? Smoothness? Beauty of line and tint? Well and good, but you can't live on color three hundred and sixty-five days in the year. How many bites will you

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promise to take in the rosiest-cheeked apple whose flesh is bitter to your taste? But if it is sweet, crisp and juicy and tanging to your palate, as pretty eating as it is pretty looking—— Aha, what then, do you say? Why, I answer, then it's like a child with a horde of fairies summoned to her christening, and haven't we discussed that point before?

“Offhand, you wouldn't call a wrinkle pretty, would you? But the next time on the street you pass that man with the three tiny crinkles at the corners of his eyes, watch him smile. Don't you wish you knew him?

“As for me, I like something to fight against. Give me a face, any kind of a face—fat, thin, squat, long—with the right kind of stuffing behind it, and I'll guarantee to storm the world. Yes, I'll use it to launch a thousand ships, but they won't be Dreadnaughts. They will have rainbow sails, some of them, and go skipping and dipping away into Nobody-Knows-Where; and some of them will be busy little tugs that can tow big battered ocean liners into port; and some of them will be barges gliding heavy freighted, or ferry-boats chug-chugging steadily right about home and loaded to the water's edge with the workaday world, but they will all fairly bulge with usefulness and happiness—and not a destroyer among them.

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“Do you know what your inside face looks like? Don't jump! Didn't know you had an inside face? Why, everybody has one. It's the face that counts, because you make it yourself. It's not the way you wish you looked, though that helps. It's the way you really would look if you could turn yourself inside out. And it is everlastingly getting mixed up with your outside face.

“There are a few people, the very fewest of few people, almost few enough for you to number them on your fingers and toes, who look alike outside and in. But most people aren't made that way, any more than most people's flesh and blood faces look alike on both sides. Haven't you ever noticed the difference? Their hair grows curlier on the left than on the right, or an eyebrow slants askew, or their ears aren't well matched, and it's only by the bridge of the nose you can tell some of them.

“Yes, of course I've got an inside face. Perhaps you see it clearer than any of the fairy folk about me, because they only look at me while I write to you. And in every letter I'm painting my really truly picture. So don't get mixed up by any lines and colors that happened to come in the package I sent you, and oh, please don't wish to mix me all up about yourself. Don't you know that the one you've got is the only face for you—

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outside? Imagine prancing around the world looking through a pair of misfit brown eyes! If I met you in Timbuctoo with your hair matched to yellow snarled silk, how would I know you were you?

“For it’s you I love, little girl, with your honest blue eyes and your odd clever little nose and your dear fanciful chin, you with your demure smooth brown hair and your straight white forehead. Only clear away the wrinkle, quick! I’m afraid I shouldn’t know how to love you half so well pranked out in curls and a Greek profile.

“So please be careful what you wish for, because

“Sometimes wishes come true
Though they bring only rue

and —

“Am I not your

“FAIRY GODMOTHER?”

With the letter clutched tight in her hand, Helen dashed for the mirror in the parlor. Her nose! She could not remember the time when her nose had not served as a family joke, to be trotted out and put through its paces on all occasions. Mother and Phillis and Floyd and the twins loved her in spite of it, because they were her family, but nobody had ever dreamed before of saying it was pleasant to look at that funny little ridge of skin

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and bone and muscle. It had always been something to live down and now —— Squinting at the offending structure, she put up two fingers and rubbed out the wrinkles. Maybe her nose wasn't so dreadfully bad ; maybe she had begun to live it down already ; maybe even it was something to live up to instead. Anyway, the fairy godmother liked it. Her feet began to prance.

"It wasn't her picture!" she cried, dancing into Cousin Anne's room.

"Whose picture?" inquired Cousin Anne, relaxing her contemplation of half a dozen photographs strewn over the bed.

"What a stunning girl!"

"As a matter of fact she is nothing of the sort, but she takes a good picture. So every year or two she floats a dozen counterfeits and gives me my choice. Would you keep the one in evening dress or the tennis girl?"

Helen inspected the pictures carefully. "I'd take the one on horseback. But, honestly, doesn't she look like that?"

"You would never recognize her in the world, my dear, if you met her on the street. She is almost ugly in every-day wear. But what picture isn't whose?"

"The fairy godmother's. I've had a letter —— Would I be interrupting if I read you a bit of it?"

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“Just think!” she finished abruptly. “A face within a face! It sounds like a hypocrite or an old Roman god, or a masquerade party, when it’s just you and me and everybody.”

“Humph!” said Cousin Anne. “Rather uncanny, isn’t it? So she thinks that the fact that my eyes happen to be cat green doesn’t make any difference with my inside face, but what I see with my cat green eyes does make a difference. Only she doesn’t say how, unless in the part you omitted to read.”

Helen flushed a bright brick color. “I—I read what I thought you’d be specially interested in. But she’s never the least bit preachy. Don’t you love that place about the thousand ships? I don’t know what it means exactly, but it makes me burn all over to read it.”

“She leaves a good deal to your imagination, I notice. How do you suppose one makes an inside face?”

Helen cupped her chin in two brown hands and thought. “Maybe it’s like embroidery,” she ventured at last shyly.

“Embroidery?” mused Cousin Anne. “Yes, a stitch at a time.”

“Only your silks are deeds and thoughts, and your needle—— What would your needle be, Cousin Anne?”

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"Your will?"

"And when you're cross and the needle gets bent and the silk snarls, it puckers your inside face, just the way a mouthful of sorrel screws up your easy-to-see face, and it smuts your nose, and draws two deep black lines right down through the middle of your forehead."

"That happens sometimes to an outside face," objected Cousin Anne.

"Oh, dear! Then perhaps fussing about your skin kind of looks spoils the other, too. She said they were awfully mixed up together. Cousin Anne, do you like embroidery?"

"Other people's, when it is well done—very much."

Helen laughed. "Phil does yards and loves it. I try once in a while something little and quick that won't outlast my patience or get too messy before I'm through. Phil is pretty inside and out."

"With exactly the same kind of prettiness," agreed Cousin Anne, "durable and satisfactory."

"Molly is lovely both ways, too, I think," said Helen loyally, "but her faces don't look a bit the same."

"She is as unexpected inside as she is faultless outside. How many fairies came to her christening, I wonder?"

CROSSPATCH AGAIN

"Oh, I hope not many! You know it's risky to have too many, Cousin Anne."

Thinking about Molly, late that afternoon Helen wandered down through the gardens to the closed gate. Perhaps Molly would be home again by now. Anyway she would go back to "Gray Shingles" and make up her quarrel with Billy and look at the birthday cake and see how the baby was feeling.

Of late when she went over the wall, as she did seven to seventeen times a day, she seldom gave an active thought to why the door was shut. The fairy godmother had been in no hurry to follow up her first lead. And now the tree's secret was always lying in wait for fancy, making her dream and wonder. If only she could think of it as a secret likely to pop out at who knew what fascinating moment of the godmother's own fairy time! In point of fact, that was the way she generally did think of it. But here, she reminded herself, you never knew what to expect, and if you expected a thing something else generally happened. After all, it was this spice of uncertainty that flavored "Red Top" so exactly to Helen's taste.

"Hello," said Billy's voice from somewhere above her head.

The girl jumped violently and blinked up at him. As she looked fear smote her.

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"What are you doing up there?"

"Come on up and see."

But she was already on the wall. "You never ——" she began, and stopped aghast.

Billy, absorbed in certain articles before him, was deaf to the signs of displeasure in his companion's voice.

"If this isn't the funniest go!" he ejaculated. "I'll bet you never saw anything like this, See-saw."

"You opened it!" she cried. "You—you opened it!"

She felt as though the earth were yawning at her feet. Billy had rifled the box. There was no blinding her eyes to its rusty contour open on Billy's knee and the neatly wrapped packages and small fancy boxes spilling out of it.

"Huh!" he snapped at her. "So you've seen this before. You're a nice pal, you are!" At her silence he looked up. "Hello! What's the matter now?"

Helen disdained reply. Her eyes were fixed on a little book in Billy's hand. Its cover was of red leather plentifully buckled and strapped. This was no common book. Billy's fingers busy at the fastenings incensed her.

"Give it to me!" she commanded.

"Huh!" Billy grunted.

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She took a swift step forward.

"No, you don't!" He held the little red book at arm's length beyond her reach. "Keep off, can't you? Or I'll drop the stuff."

"Billy Holbrook," she said slowly and distinctly, "you're the meanest boy I ever saw in my life—the very meanest."

Billy grinned. "Oho, she's mad. This tree's as free as the road. I'm not poaching on any preserves of yours, Seesaw."

"To peek at a thing that isn't meant for you—when it isn't time—when it says right out ——" Anger choked her, but her eyes remained fascinatedly riveted on the open box.

"You didn't put 'em here!"

"Of course not."

"Then what on earth are you talking about?"

"I s'pose you've read the letter, too." It must be confessed tears were very near Helen's lids.

"Letter! Letter! What letter? Your top-knot's got a kink in it."

She leaned over and abstracted the leather case from the crotch of a limb. It remained intact, as she had left it.

"Ho, that! Is that a letter?"

Helen nodded, swallowing chokily over the lump that seemed to fill her whole throat. "But

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I didn't open it. I left it just as it said till nineteen-thirty. And you —— Oh, Billy!"

"Oh, Billy!" he mimicked. "Nineteen-thirty. Where does nineteen-thirty come in?"

Word for word she repeated the superscription of the letter.

"And you're telling me you found all this and didn't open up?"

"Not a single tiny peek."

Billy threw back his head and shouted. "No wonder you're mad. Well, come on now and we'll do it together. I haven't gone far."

"But ——" said Helen.

"But ——" gibed Billy.

"It says nineteen-thirty."

"Rot!"

"I found it first and I ought to have the say about it."

"You didn't stake your claim or enter it on the records. Possession's nine points of the law."

"I wouldn't take 'em if it wasn't fair."

"Then you'd be a ninny."

"Well, I'd be a ninny then."

"You couldn't be any more of a ninny than you are."

She scorned this thrust. "Are you going to put back that book?"

"No, I'm not."

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He slipped the last clasp and, still holding the little red book at arm's length, opened it with a thumb and forefinger. Helen could see that its pages were covered with writing.

"Oh! Oh! Oh!" she said. If disgust and anger and scorn could paralyze, Billy would have been helpless before her. As it was, he continued to hold her off with one hand while with the other he turned page after page, and chuckled and grinned as though what he found were amusing him vastly. Helen hadn't a notion that the grins were put on for her benefit and that Billy really wasn't reading a word. Powerless and outraged, she turned on her heel and descended the step-ladder.

So long as she was in sight Billy continued to turn the leaves of the little red book and give way at intervals to gusty joy. When the last scornful bob of her skirt had been gone at least five minutes, he shut the book, rebuckled its clasps, and stowed it away with the other things, still unopened, in the metal box, and returned the box to the tree. But first he had to see for himself the handwriting on the letter and reinforce the box cover with a couple of rubber bands from his pocket. Those hinges were no good, he reflected.

Half an hour later with his mind as completely divested of the squabble as his conscience

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was clear of intentional offense, he went in search of Helen. He found her curled up unhappily on a seat in the rose garden, meditating on the depravity of boys in general and of Billy in particular. But this he did not know. A rose flew through the air, hit her in the face and dropped to her lap. She shook it off her skirt and it fell to the grass, where her foot swung over it.

"Come along over the wall and talk to a chap."

She regarded him coldly. "No, thank you. I don't care to talk just now."

Billy's face fell. "Don't be huffy, Seesaw, on a fellow's last night."

"I'm not huffy. I'm just"—she searched for a word and produced it triumphantly—"grieved."

Silence in the rose garden.

"What do you mean by your last night?"

"What I say."

If Helen had looked at him she might have seen that something was wrong. If she had not been so angry when she found him with the precious secret-box open in his hands, she might have seen it then. Now she did not even glance at him. Billy was exasperating, not at all the boy she had thought him, and she had no wish to be burdened with his company.

"Oh, are you going away?" she asked perfunctorily.

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"Yep."

"Rather sudden, isn't it?"

What did he suppose his going away mattered to her? she was thinking. "Red Top" would be much nicer without meddlesome boys about. But it was queer nothing of this sort had been mentioned in the morning.

"Lots you care, don't you?" said Billy.

Helen continued to pick at the rose in the grass. "Perhaps," she said frankly, "when I get over being mad at you, I shall miss you. Just now I honestly don't care."

"Mad? Oh, you mean over that stuff in the tree."

"Don't talk about it. You'll make it worse. Why did you come over here anyway?"

"A fellow likes to have somebody say good-bye to him," Billy grumbled, digging the toe of his boot into the turf.

"Stop that!" commanded Helen. "You'll spoil the grass. Wasn't your family enough to say good-bye to?" It was not polite, but she did not feel polite.

Billy swung on his heel. "I'm not giving 'em the chance."

It was a minute before his words made any impression on her brain.

"What did you say?"

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He was striding down the garden path.

"Billy!"

No answer.

She slipped off the seat and ran after him, overtaking him half-way through the last garden.

"What did you say, Billy?"

"I said I wasn't giving 'em the chance to say good-bye to me."

"You mean—you mean—I don't know what you mean."

"Pop-eyes!"

Helen's brow cleared. "You exasperating boy!" she told him. "You're not going anywhere. Do you suppose you can keep on jollyng me forever without taking the trouble to think up new ways?"

"All right. Call it a jolly if you like. Just the same, I've quit."

He swung himself over the wall. Swiftly she ran up the step-ladder and dropped beside him into the green cubby-hole.

"Billy Holbrook, what on earth are you talking about?"

"Just what I said. I'm going to paddle my own canoe, since I can't seem to suit dad paddling one of his."

"Don't—don't the others know?"

"If you open your eyes so wide, Seesaw, the

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hinges may crack. Know that I'm going off? Hardly. But they know all about that fuss at school. Oh, yes, they know I'm expelled."

Helen's heart felt as though a hand had clutched it and were squeezing tight. She forgot about Billy's meanness. She remembered only that she had been cross this morning and bothering about not being pretty, when Billy and Molly and the rest of the Holbrooks were in real trouble.

CHAPTER XI

BILLY SPEAKS OUT

“EXPELLED! Oh, Billy!”

“It amounts to that. If I don’t take back what I said, which of course I won’t do—no fellow would—I’m fired.”

Round and round like a squirrel in its cage, the word whirled through Helen’s head. “And I thought you had just flunked your lessons!” she cried at last.

“Because I had some books around? I was going to work like a dog this summer. Had a notion I could study up and get into college a year earlier, and I’ll bet I could, too, but dad says no short cuts. I finish school or—I don’t go to college. Never dreamed he’d take it so hard. Thought we were having a nice little tug of war, Simeon and I. Simeon’s the principal, you know. And if father hadn’t stepped in and helped him pull, I’ll bet it would have been a toss-up between us. He banked on my giving in, I know that. Maybe he banked on dad, too.” The boy’s face was gloomy as he turned it on the girl. “Wish me luck, won’t you?”

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“Wish you —— Oh, you didn’t mean it, Billy ! You’re—not—going—to—run—away !”

“Run ? Of course not. I’m going to walk at any old gait I happen to fancy and swing on to a train and —— Don’t be a crawfish, Seesaw. I thought you had sand, or I’d never have let out a word. A fellow likes to say good-bye to somebody when he’s leaving home for good —— But climb back over your wall. Scuttle now !” He was on his feet.

Helen snatched the idea that happened to come uppermost in her topsyturvy mind. “But it’s Molly’s birthday !”

“Tell me something I don’t know.”

“You’re not going to do it to-night.”

“Why not ? It wouldn’t be any worse than blowing on myself to father yesterday. Why a fellow with the sense of a jackass couldn’t have seen he’d better lie low two days more ! But I’d kept putting it off and putting it off until Moll said if I waited much longer Simeon’s letter would get in ahead of me. So I upped and did it.”

“Was it very bad ?”

“Ever stumble into a hornets’ nest ? I did once when I was a kid and they wrapped me up in cotton wool for days afterward. Yesterday I did it again. But let me tell you I’ll take the black stingerees every time rather than the sort that

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come out of dad's mouth when he's discovered that you're stuffed with sawdust and your head's a hole. No, I can't do a thing to Moll's birthday after yesterday. It's done."

Helen stared at him helplessly bewildered. "Sit down again this minute, and tell me what it is you're talking about. I have got sand, Billy. I have. No matter how bad it is, I can bear it."

"Oh, come now," he expostulated, dropping to the grass, "you'd think I'd stolen the spoons out of the mess hall or cribbed an exam or cut for a week, at the very least."

"Billy," said Helen plaintively, "won't you please stop talking about what you've done and talk it—straight?"

"I got mad one day and sassed a fellow."

A long drawn breath slowly released whistled through Helen's teeth. "Is that all, Billy? I thought maybe you had half killed somebody."

"Not so ugly, is it? That's the way I feel."

"But what made you do it?"

"Mad," repeated Billy laconically.

"Why?"

"Oh, I've never liked the fellow. No bad blood between us exactly, but we don't hit it off well together—haven't since a bunch of us new boys encountered at commons. He'd brought up his automobubble and thought he owned the campus. Big

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talk! You couldn't tell him anything. I was green enough, but even I knew he was blowing a little too loud. I guess he got all that was coming to him. So did I, for that matter."

"Now you're hedging," she said severely. "If you're going to tell me anything at all, Billy Holbrook, tell me what made you mad."

Billy selected a grass blade with care. "Saw him turn off a mean trick, one of those little things that's just in his line."

"To you?"

"No—to a fellow who couldn't hit back. Babs knew he couldn't, too. Mad sizzled around inside me for about two weeks and then I met him one day and let out what I thought of him. Nothing sugar-coated, you understand—straight talk. He gagged on it and offered to knock me down. I blocked that move by doing it to him first."

"And somebody saw you ——"

"Everybody saw me. I hadn't chosen my time or place well—too public, you know, and I got hauled up. What did I mean by assaulting a classmate on the open green? Simeon had us both going, for a while, but in the end he concentrated on me. I must apologize or quit."

"Then didn't that other boy do anything at all?"

"He played the heavy magnanimous. He's not asking for an apology, not he, and won't the

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powers let up a bit? But not one word does he say about begging Foley's pardon—the fellow he'd walked all over, you know, and as straight a chap as there is in school. Some of the boys were for going to the office and blurting out the whole business, but I stopped 'em. A fellow can't have that kind of thing."

"And couldn't your old principal see through that boy at all?"

"Generally he's pretty keen, but he didn't see farther than the end of his nose into this. Besides, his blood was up, and when he's 'sot' a mule isn't any 'sotter.'

"'Apologize,' says he, 'before the fall term opens or cut out your senior year.'

"'Apologies be blowed,' says I, or words to that effect. 'When T. B. gets one from W. H. you'll catch a dead weasel awake.'

"So there we are."

"Then you've got all summer ——"

Billy turned on her.

"Look me in the eye, Seesaw, and say that it's up to me to eat my words, if you dare."

"Well, I do," said Helen. "I think that horrid boy ought to apologize more. But couldn't you just say you were sorry you knocked him down?"

"Which I'm not. What I'd like more than anything else I can think of is to do it again."

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"Oh, dear!" Helen clasped her hands around her knees and rocked back and forth. "Oh, dear, I suppose this is that pig-headed old temper you said you'd got. Maybe it's wicked, but I can't help being glad you knocked him down, though I don't know what it was he'd done to the other boy. Only I thought when people did that they always jumped up and shook hands afterward."

"I'll shake hands with Babbie just as quick as he goes down on his knees to Jim Foley. That's what I told father."

"And he said ——"

"Said from what I'd told him he judged Babs's course should be as I'd mapped out in my remark, but that was his business and it wasn't mine to knock Babs down, especially at such long range from the provocation! Oh, dad piled on the dictionary. And he'd stand by to see me fired because while in school I was under the orders of the principal. Brawling on the front campus was conduct unbecoming 'an officer and a gentleman.' No wonder the fellow fired up at getting my broadside; he'd have been mad if he'd been Babs. And how did I know all the things I said? Granted I did know them—dad allows me so much—I'd much better have kept still. All of which is righter than right. But when he says if I'll apologize he'll stand by to see Babs do likewise I just

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remind him he's passed his word not to put Simeon wise to the Foley business. So there you are again. And he won't set me up at any other school, either."

"What does your sister say?"

"Moll sides with father. She would, you know. They're great pals."

Silence fell between the two while Helen considered Billy's disjointed story. "You're so queer, Billy," she said at last. "Sometimes when you talk I think you really feel as though it was what you call the square thing to apologize——"

"Not square, Seesaw. Triangular. With the hypotenuse broadside to yours truly."

"Right, then, if you don't like square. Honest Injun, don't you think you owe that boy something?"

"Sure," said Billy pleasantly. "But no more than he owes Foley. I'll apologize just as soon as Babbie does, and not one minute sooner, as I've told you before."

"But somebody's got to begin."

"He can do that."

"'After you, Alphonse,'" Helen quoted. "Don't you remember the picture? Neither old dandy would go through the gate before the other and in the end they turned around and trotted off home the same ways they had come. It's perfectly ridiculous."



“AND NOW YOU ARE TALKING OF RUNNING AWAY”



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Billy scowled. "It's no good talking," he said.

"But when you know you ought."

"I'm taking a vacation from oughts."

He watched her tightly closed lips for a full minute. "What are you doing now?"

"Counting ten."

"Why?"

"Because, Billy Holbrook, you can be absolutely the horriddest boy I ever saw. Here you're giving that Babbie creature the satisfaction of seeing you turned out of school and making your family miserable just to coddle your old pride. Oh, you stupid! What do you care about that boy? You'd say something in a minute if it was anybody else. You'd find a way to do it without telling lies or taking back anything you didn't want to take back. And now you're talking of running away from home! Running away! Just because your father doesn't hold a club over the principal's head and make him eat his own words or let you pick out a new school to suit yourself. If I were you I'd want to hide my face for even thinking of such a thing!"

"Look here, Miss Over-the-Wall!" Billy sat up. "Maybe you think I'm just peeved, but I'm not. I'll tell you another thing. I'm going to work my way through college. By the time your two years are up I can give you points on the working man's

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career that will turn your hair pink. But I'll make good. And when I've done it I'll come back and say, 'Well, dad, it turned out not so bad after all, though I didn't give in.' And he'll say, 'Not so worse, son.' But while I'm working up to that little speech, how am I going to live on father? Tell me that. Don't you see if I don't give in I've got to go away—or cut out college? Whatever you think, I don't call it square to let father pay the bills while I scheme to get my own way, live on him all summer and work to pass college exams in the fall."

Helen's next remark took the wind out of his ballooning sails.

"Has your mother ever been sick, Billy?" she asked.

"Why no, not much, I guess. Never when I've been home. Why?"

"Because things somehow look differently when your mother's sick. The house is so awfully queer and you'd do anything, just anything to make her well, and you think of all the things you've ever done that she didn't like, and they gnaw you nights, Billy."

A big tear slipped over one eyelid and dripped down her cheek.

Billy slid a hand into his pocket and tossed a handkerchief across the intervening green. "Oh,

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come now!" he expostulated. "Your mother's getting better. Didn't you tell me so yourself yesterday?"

"That doesn't make it any comfortabler for me to have been cross and bothered her so. I squizzle all up inside, when I remember how nasty I was."

"My mother isn't sick."

"But she wouldn't know where you were nights, Billy. She wouldn't know where you were any of the time. Why, one day a year ago last fall Floyd went off with some boys into the woods. They were to be back by supper time and not later than nine o'clock anyway. But it got to be ten and eleven and twelve and they didn't come, and nobody in town knew anything about them. The twins slept right through till morning, and mother and Phillis thought maybe I would, but I didn't. Mother was sure Floyd had fallen down something and broken his leg or somebody had shot him by mistake for a partridge, but why didn't they come and tell her? And Phillis tried to talk as if everything was all right and maybe the boys were spending the night at a farmhouse, finding they'd got away pretty far from home. 'Couldn't they telephone?' mother said.

"And after that we didn't do anything but wait. I snoozed off once in a while but mother and Phillis didn't sleep a wink, though we all went to

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bed. Do you know how queer and hobgoblinish a night looks right in the very middle when it's black as pitch or just a little gray at the edges and your very own onliest brother is you-don't-know where? Do you know now how it sounds, all squeaky and stealthy and just ready to pop out on you some dreadful scary secret that you're afraid to hear, and you want to cover up your head in the bedclothes to keep it off, but you dassent because that might be a step on the walk?"

"Floyd came back all right, didn't he?" asked Billy gruffly.

"He came home at six in the morning on his two feet, whistling. The boys had found a shack in the woods and somebody had proposed spending the night there, they were going to be so late getting home. And he'd thought mother would know he was somewhere with the fellows and it would be all right. Floyd never stayed away another night without telling her where he was. Why, last May when the ball team missed the last train that stops at our station he telephoned twice to make sure she understood. But the morning when she didn't get up and the doctor looked so sober as he came down-stairs, Floyd thought about that time in October, I know he did. I was remembering every single thing I'd ever done to worry her, myself."

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"You're a good sort, Seesaw," said Billy. "But this affair of mine is different from Floyd's night out."

"She's got your father—your mother has, I mean—and Floyd was all the man of the house we had. That's different. But what do you suppose she'd have done if Floyd hadn't come back?"

"It's a matter of principle with me," he argued, "and a girl can't be expected to understand principle. You're not logical."

Helen turned on him. "I should hope not, Billy Holbrook! I should hope we weren't logical if logical means not caring how much you hurt the people that love you the best. Don't you suppose I'd go down on my knees and scrub floors for the rest of my life if it would smooth out of mother's face just one of the wrinkles that I've helped to put there? And here you stick at four little easy words, 'I beg your pardon.' A great big boy like you!"

"We won't fight about it," said Billy, springing to his feet. "And—of course you'll not give me away."

Slowly Helen shook out her skirts. Silently she laid hands on the step-ladder.

"Look here, Seesaw! If you let out a word of this to a soul I'll cut instanter, so fast you won't

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see a thing but the dust behind me. Now, what do you say?"

"I say you're a bullying old clubwhacker and I never dreamed you could act so—never!"

"Anything else?"

"And that if I'm not logical and haven't any principles, I don't see how you could expect me to keep a promise if I made one."

"Go on," inexorably.

"And that—and that—— You didn't mean it."

"I certainly didn't mean anything else."

"Oh, dear! You know you've got me, Billy."

"Then you'll keep dark?"

"Ye-es."

"Honor bright?"

"Honor—bright."

In the warm-scented darkness Helen lay awake a long time worrying about Billy and wondering whether she had done wrong to promise not to tell. But how could she have helped it? For nothing was surer than that Billy would have carried out his threat on the minute had she refused to give her word. And tattletales were such hateful creatures. Yet in spite of the best she could do for herself her poor little heart squirmed and twisted. Perhaps it was selfish of Billy to make her an unwilling partner in his plans, but deeper

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than resentment pricked the fear that he might really run away. He had sounded so dead in earnest and, worst sign of all, his eyes had looked so sober as he talked, not once glimmering impishly, but stern and still and almost coal black under the smudge of his brows. If only he hadn't the queer kink in his brain that told him there was nothing else to do. Or if only his bulldog temper would let go its strangle hold. Where was he now? Getting his things together for a start. Trudging along a dark country road. Sweet as a flower Molly's face flitted across the curtain of her closed eyelids. Molly's laugh caressed her ears. Molly's gay pretty practical ways tugged at her memory. After Molly's flashed Mrs. Holbrook's face as it had looked when she smiled that morning in the kitchen, dear and funny and tired and a little pale from her night's vigil with Harold.

And then her own mother's loomed out of the darkness, warm and loving as the touch of the flesh and blood hand that her little daughter had so often nestled to. A big choking sob caught at Helen's throat. Turning, she buried her face in the pillow. "Dear God," she sobbed, "don't let Billy run away! Oh, don't let Billy run away!"

"Cousin Anne, how can you make people do what is good for them?" The words, abruptly

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setting a period to a morning with French chateaux, met no faintest flicker of surprise on the couch.

"That is a question which has baffled philosophers, my dear, and the answer is—you can't."

"Oh!" The sound died in a discouraged little breath.

"Was there somebody you particularly wanted to try it on?"

"Billy."

Cousin Anne considered for some time. "I haven't seen much of Billy," she said at last, "but judging from what you tell me, if I were very anxious to have Billy not do a thing, I'd be rather careful about over urging him to refrain. Indeed, I think I'd possibly seem a little bit in favor of what I didn't want."

Leaning forward with clasped hands, the girl studied the suggestion. "I shouldn't wonder if there was a whole lot in that," she conceded. "But, oh, Cousin Anne, I wish I could see my mother!"

"I wish you could, my dear."

"The world seems so dreadfully puzzling sometimes." The words came with a rush. "Do you ever feel as though you'd got to make things come out right—you couldn't let them go wrong, and yet you're scared pink lest they should and you can't do a thing to help it? Why, Cousin Anne, sometimes I feel as though I were a little puppy

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and a big dog had me by the throat and was—just—shaking—me.”

Cousin Anne nodded. “I know what you mean. But he lets go after a while. And then sometimes the puppy finds he has a new friend.”

“But the shaking’s no fun,” said Helen.

“I quite agree with you. What do you say to that bowl of roses? Stale, aren’t they? Suppose we have something fresh.”

A wide flat basket on her arm, and the shears in her hand, Helen loitered through the gardens. She did not intend to loiter, but dread kept pulling at her shoes and distracting her mind from a decision between peonies and roses and, if roses, what kind and color. She wished she had courage to make an errand to “Gray Shingles.” But she was afraid to meet Billy and more afraid lest she shouldn’t meet him. Imagination teased and cajoled and bullied her toward the wall, but coward feet refused to budge further than the rose garden.

“Look here! That’s no way to cut roses!”

“Oh, Billy!”

“Billy for sure,” he mimicked, pouncing on the scissors she had dropped. “Still on the planet, you see, Miss Over-the-Wall. Here’s some flummy diddle—can’t remember its name—that Moll’s made for Cousin Sci’s dinner. Wait till I land it

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with Mrs. Higgins and then I'll show you a thing or two."

Compounded of steel springs and a grin, Billy pranced back to the roses and whipped out his knife. "Jo'd give you one for slashing off buds the way you were doing," he informed her. "But you needn't look as though you'd hauled a sinner on to the golden cobblestones. When I get good and ready I'll cut just the same and not a minute before. See?"

Snip went Helen's scissors and a golden-hearted rose fell into the basket. "Get me that high pink one, please, Billy," she said calmly.

Billy cut it. "Dad heard from Simeon last night," he volunteered. "I wasn't much too soon with my little spiel. That man's a dabster at setting things out. I'd sure have mistaken Babs for a whitewashed innocent, if I hadn't been wise to a thing or two he doesn't know."

"Pity about the principal," said Helen. "Where's that boy you call Babs this summer?"

"Skating over the map of Europe in his automobile. There's just one thing I'll set down to Babs's credit. He knows how to run a car like a bird." Billy chuckled suddenly. "And he thinks he knows how to name a cat."

"Name a cat! What a queer thing to say!"

"Fact. About the only time I ever was in his

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room, two years ago, too, and he was feeling slick and so was I—want that slap-up white fellow, See-saw? All right—he had a galumping big picture of one stuck up over his desk. Only picture in the room. That's why I noticed it. 'Hello,' says I. 'Who's your friend?' 'Mr. Dooley,' says he. 'Belongs to my sister. Named him myself.' Queer how such a little thing sticks like a burr to a chap's memory when a hundred history dates slide off. What's the matter?"

"Mr. Dooley!" she caught her breath. "Was that all?"

"Well, no, not quite. But I've just remembered I can't tell you the rest."

"And the boy's name——"

"I didn't mention it."

"His name," said Helen distinctly, "is Ted Babbitt."

Billy wheeled on her. "How'd you know!"

She clapped her hands. "Because I'm a witch, a witch, a witch!"

"You've been pumping Moll."

"Pumping Molly! Didn't I give you my word I wouldn't say a thing about what you'd told me, Billy Holbrook! And if you think I go around squirming myself into people's secrets that they don't want me to know——"

"How did you find out, then?"

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"You told me yourself."

"I—never!"

"Now, Billy, be careful! I didn't know for sure; I only guessed until you swallowed his name the way a dog snaps at a cooky."

"You've got me, Seesaw. But I say, if I'd dreamed you knew the chap——"

"I don't," laughed Helen, watching the bewilderment deepen in his face. "I never saw Ted Babbitt in my life, but I'll tell you another thing about him. He isn't skating over the map of Europe. He's down here in Fairfield, only twenty miles off, on the map of Vermont."

CHAPTER XII

A REAL GRANDMOTHER

"Do you know much about Fairfield?" Helen asked.

"My uncle lives in Fairfield," said Sarah Stuart. "I've been there."

"Do you know a woman named Mrs. Howe?"

"Which Mrs. Howe? There are three Mrs. Howes in Fairfield."

"Oh, dear! I hoped there was only one."

"Perhaps you mean Mrs. Silas Howe."

Helen's face cleared.

"That's the name; I couldn't remember. But how did you know?"

"Everybody in Fairfield knows the Silas Howes. It's the likeliest guess I could make."

"Tell me about them."

"I don't know them personally. There are two girls and a boy. They were all in the Fairfield pageant last summer. One of the girls was an early settler and the boy was an Indian. I've forgotten what the other girl did. I saw Mrs. Howe there, too."

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"Is she very, very fat and are the girls very, very thin?"

Sarah nodded.

"She's the one," said Helen. "When I came through she was at the Fairfield station to meet her niece."

She told the story of Ellen and Mr. Dooley.

Sarah Stuart laughed heartily. "I shall have to tell my grandmother about that," she said.

"Oh, have you a grandmother?"

Sarah nodded.

"I never saw either of mine."

"She lives with us."

"It must be nice to know your own grandmother."

"It is. Come up and see mine."

"Is she a real grandmotherey grandmother?"

"You're a queer-talking girl sometimes," Sarah said. "What do you mean by a real grandmotherey grandmother?"

"I mean, does she wear caps and cunning little white curls and knit all the time? I've seen grandmothers you couldn't tell were that at all by the way they dressed."

"Oh, yes," said Sarah. "She's that kind of a grandmother, all right. Only she doesn't knit very much. She sews instead."

"What on?"

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"Anything—everything. She makes a lot of bed quilts, for one thing—silk ones, you know, the crazy kind. Sometimes they're log cabin pattern. People are always sending her bags of silk scraps. She's made half a dozen already since she was ninety."

"Ninety!" gasped Helen.

Sarah smiled. "She doesn't look it," she said. "She's quick for her years, and she reads without glasses and you can't tell her anything you've read in the newspaper that she doesn't know already, and ten to one she can tell you something that you never noticed. She's the smartest old lady anywhere around here."

"I thought you said she was over ninety."

"I did. If you don't believe it when you see her I'll show you the entry of her birth in great-grandfather's Bible."

"But would she like to see me?"

"She always likes to see people."

"I suppose she told you about Agatha Allen."

"Yes. Her grandmother told her. Her grandmother knew Agatha Allen. She was one of those who took refuge in the stockade."

"Cousin Anne told me some more stories about Agatha Allen," Helen said absently.

All the while she was thinking, what would it be like to see a woman who had actually seen a

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woman who had seen Agatha Allen? The thought sent a thrill through her. It also frightened her a little. Why, Sarah Stuart's grandmother was almost a hundred years old! A hundred years! Fancy seeing a woman who had lived as long as that. It would be like seeing Methuselah. Her own nearly fourteen years looked very short.

"I will come, Sarah," she promised solemnly.

Sarah received the promise with surprising calmness. "That's good," she said. "I've told her about you."

"Why didn't you tell me about her before?" Helen inquired curiously. "If I had a grandmother over ninety years old, I'd be bragging about her all the time to everybody I met."

Helen dressed for her call with as much care as though she were going to see the queen.

"It wouldn't quite do to wear my fairy god-mother dress, would it, Cousin Anne?"

"Not quite, I'm afraid."

"No, I s'posed not. And you wouldn't exactly like to go to see a person 'most a hundred years old in a blue muslin that you had to wear a sash with because you had done something queer to its back. You ought not to have anything to conceal when you go to see that kind of a person."

"I agree with you entirely."

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"And my organdie hasn't any more spunk than a rabbit."

"That settles its fate. Mrs. Sefton likes plenty of spunk."

"Is that her name? I just called her Sarah Stuart's grandmother."

"Mrs. Mehitabel Sefton," said Cousin Anne.

"Mehitabel! What a queer name! But I like it. Wouldn't you know she must have been born a long long time ago to have such a name as that? But, Cousin Anne, what shall I wear?"

"Where is that pretty white linen I've seen sometimes?"

"Up-stairs, perfectly fresh, in my closet. Is that what you'd wear, Cousin Anne?"

Cousin Anne intimated that it was.

"I didn't know whether it was grand enough," said Helen. "She's such a tremendously remarkable old lady."

"Never overdress, my dear."

"But have your nails nice and your hair smooth and everything about you spandy clean. That's what mother tells us. She says it's the little things that show the gentlewoman."

"I see she has brought you up well."

"Oh, she has. She brought us up perfectly. Only sometimes we don't do the way we were brought up to do. Phil does mostly, but I——

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Cousin Annie, I do love to splurge sometimes. It isn't nice, is it?"

"Not very," said Cousin Anne. "I sometimes wish it were. For instance, when I pine for a cherry colored suit and buy gray."

"That's it exactly!" Helen cried. "The color you love won't be serviceable or Phil will call it loud or mother will think it won't go with anything else you have. And so you have to take some horrid dusty dead color—no, that's exaggerating—some mild tame make-believe color when you're wanting a fine flaunting real color. But I don't want to splurge before Sarah's grandmother. I just want to dress up enough."

"I think you're wise to decide on the white linen."

"Then I must go and whitewash my shoes, or they won't be dry enough to wear."

It was an immaculate girl who a few hours later gravely revolved under Cousin Anne's eyes and, carrying Cousin Anne's white linen parasol, paraded solemnly through the gardens. She climbed the wall, holding her skirts away from contact with its probably dusty bricks. As scrupulously she descended.

Billy lay at ease in the hiding-hole.

"Where are you going all dressed up?" he demanded.

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"To see a grandmother," said Helen. She paused to allow the importance of this statement to percolate Billy's mind. But Billy failed to look upon her errand with the awe which Helen felt for it.

"Whose grandmother?"

"Sarah Stuart's. Have you got one?"

"Not on the planet."

"She's over ninety," said Helen. Her voice whispered the momentous words.

Billy affected fear. "Better turn around, Seesaw."

"And her grandmother, who told her stories when she was a little girl, used to know Agatha Allen."

"Don't believe it," said Billy.

"Why not?"

"Too slick a story."

"I don't see why you say that."

"You're easy, Seesaw."

"I guess if you were over ninety years old you'd know what you'd seen when you were a girl, Billy Holbrook!"

"There you're wrong."

Helen stared at him.

"I wouldn't have been a girl, Miss Over-the-Wall."

She turned her back and started up the hill.

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" 'Bye, Seesaw."

" 'Bye."

Walking carefully, to keep her shoes as dustless as might be on a dusty road, Helen skirted the berry field. Sarah waved to her, and she waited.

" I'm through for to-day," said Sarah, hurrying to join Helen. " Were you going to see grandmother? She'll be glad of that. How nice you look ! "

Helen beamed. " Do I? I'm so glad. I—I think I'm getting a little bit scared, Sarah."

" What of? Grandmother? Well, you are a queer girl."

" You'd be scared maybe, if she didn't belong to you."

" She won't eat you alive," said Sarah drily. " She prefers her callers well done."

" Is she awfully imposing? "

Sarah smiled. " Wait and see."

Helen smiled too when she saw Sarah's grandmother. She smiled because no one could help catching the contagion of her hostess's pleasure. She smiled also because she remembered her own question. " Just the same she is imposing," she told Sarah afterward. " Only she's so dear you forget about it right away."

The sitting-room into which they went was simple and worn and spotless. There was a

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Turkey red sofa and a table covered with books and magazines, and a kitten playing with a spool and string. Doubtless there were other things present, but these were all Helen noticed before she saw the old lady at the window.

She was a tiny old lady and she had bright black eyes, so bright and so black and so full of twinkles that Helen almost jumped when they turned on her. Soft white hair rippled back under the lace of her cap and on either side of her wrinkled rose leaf cheeks dropped two delicious frost work curls. A work table stood beside her flowered chintz chair, covered with a litter of gay-colored silk pieces, and beyond her busy needle a few belated morning-glories looked in at the window.

"Here's Helen Thayer come to see you, grandmother," said Sarah.

The little old lady put out her hand. "You'll excuse my not getting up, dear. So you're Mary Allen's daughter. Dear! Dear! It seems only yesterday that she was coming over here to see my Jane. Your mother was a pretty girl, dear."

"My older sister Phillis is pretty," Helen said.

The black eyes twinkled at her. "Handsome is as handsome does, they used to tell me when I was a girl. Cold comfort according to my way of thinking for them that were plain, and the hand-

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some ones didn't mind it much, seeing that they had their beauty."

"You must have been awfully pretty yourself," Helen said, and then blushed brick red at the abruptness with which her thought had slipped into words. "You're so pretty now," she explained, blushing again.

The little old lady twinkled at her more gayly than ever. "A friend of my mother's told me it was lucky my father had property, for I had neither beauty nor brains to recommend me. After a while I found a man who thought differently, and when I did I took him."

"I don't believe he was the first to think so."

"Maybe not. I'm not telling."

They laughed together understandingly.

"You are your mother's own daughter," said Grandma Sefton. "You laugh like her, even if you don't look like her."

"Do I, truly? Oh, I'm so glad you told me. Nobody ever said I was the least bit like her before."

"Is she well, dear?"

Then Helen had to explain all about her mother's illness and why it was she had come to "Red Top" instead of her sister.

"I wanted to stay at home and take care of mother and the house, but Phillis and Floyd said I

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couldn't. Don't you think I'm old enough to do a thing like that?"

"Folks can always do what they have to," the little grandmother told her. "Whether it's the best thing or not is another matter. My oldest sister was married at fifteen and had a house of her own. We thought it quite a matter of course. Nowadays a girl hasn't finished her common schooling at fifteen, and if she goes to college, there are four years more. Our brothers went to college, some of them. Nobody ever thought of sending us. But we went to the district school and studied with the boys and made out to learn our lessons as well as they did. Boys and girls were thirsty for learning when I was young, dear. It was a good time to be alive."

"Tell me about it," breathed the girl.

The little old lady leaned back in her chair and looked out over the morning-glories into a far, far country, the land of her youth.

Helen waited silently.

"There was nothing above the district school here when I was a girl," she began. "Big and little, boys and girls, toddlers and great six foot men, we went together. In the summer the school was mostly made up of girls; the boys were needed for the farm work. In the winter months the big boys crowded the benches and some of the smallest

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tots stayed at home. That was the difference between summer term and winter term.

"After a while some of us learned all we could be taught in the district school, and even then weren't ready to stop. One night I came home all excitement. There was to be a school in Rye that winter and Jim Bates and Jedediah Thorn were going. Jed's sister had told me so. I couldn't eat my supper that night. I couldn't swallow. After supper I did a daring thing. I went up to father where he sat before the fire. 'Father,' I said, 'may I go to the school at Rye this winter? James Bates and Jedediah Thorn are going, and I was in their classes all last year.'

"Father looked at me a minute, and I held my breath. 'We shall see,' he told me at last.

"Most fathers of that time would have asked what a girl wanted of more learning than I had already, but father was proud of my brains, as I know now, though he was careful not to let me know it then. People took pains not to spoil their children when I was a girl. I need not tell you that all this happened a number of years—two or three, I think—after the lady told me that I lacked both brains and beauty, and I was making something of a reputation as a blue-stockings, though I did not know that, either, at the time.

"Well, I heard nothing of the school project for

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a fortnight. I'd have thought father had forgotten all about it, but that it was not father's way to forget anything. At the end of a fortnight he called me to him. 'Daughter,' he said, 'I have made all the arrangements for you to go to school in Rye this winter. Mr. Lewis is sending Nancy. You will both live at home and drive over every day with James and Jedediah.'

"Girls of to-day don't feel about going to school the way I felt when father told me that I might go to Rye. I thought Eden had come back again. My granddaughter Sarah might feel so perhaps. The 'arrangements' were just such as father's energy and thoughtfulness would provide. We had five miles to drive to school and there were four families to be convenienced. Jed Thorn drove the horse that father provided, hitched to a carriage of Mr. Lewis's. I have forgotten what was the Bates's contribution. Five days of every week throughout that winter term we four young people twice covered the road between here and Rye. I don't remember that I missed a day for wind or weather. And the winds could sweep up here then as they sweep now, and the snow could drift.

"The academy had no building then. Our schoolroom was over a store, one room for study and recitation alike. But what we learned! And

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the eagerness with which we learned it! Boys, and a few girls too, came from all the towns around. I was in class with Jim and Jed. They were preparing for college. Some people thought father foolish to let me study with the boys, but he liked to see what I could do." The little old lady twinkled. "I don't think I disappointed him."

Helen twinkled back.

"After that winter the boys went to college, but, as I say, there was no college for me to go to. The nineteenth century was pretty young then, dear, and it didn't much believe in educating girls. Sarah comes on the world at a different time. I'm glad for her. But I don't believe that when she gets to college she will find any more zeal of learning in its halls than we young people found eighty years ago in our little country school over the store."

"I know enough now to know that," said Sarah. "It comes easy to most of the girls who go to college in these days, so they don't care—not as you cared, granny."

"We'll care," Helen said. "Sarah and I. And Molly cares."

"Tell her some of the stories you've told me about Agatha Allen," Sarah prompted.

So, sitting by the gay flowered chair with its alert little old occupant, her patchwork pieces a

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drift of color in her black silk lap, Helen listened to tale after tale of Agatha Allen; stored them up in her mind to be relived days later in the hiding-hole, to be told over and over to the twins when at home bedtime descended on the house under the elms.

From Agatha Allen they branched out, comparing notes on the universe at large.

"You want to interfere just the littlest tiny speck," Helen heard herself saying after a while, "but you know somebody won't like it. And yet you think maybe you ought. What do you do then?"

"Do it without letting 'em ever know it's done," said Sarah's grandmother promptly. "That's the only way it's really safe to meddle with other folks' business. If you can't do it so, don't do it at all, dear. And even then it's a risk. Folks are spry at finding out what you don't want 'em to know."

"You couldn't help going to college, with a grandmother like that!" Helen told Sarah outside the door. "Could you now?"

"I don't see how I could," Sarah answered. "I thought you'd like her." The commonplace words veiled strong feeling.

"She's such a darling!" Helen thought rapturously on her homeward walk. "If Sarah hadn't

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been there, I could have told her all about the fairy godmother and the oak with the secret in it, and she'd have understood perfectly—I know she'd have understood. Anyway, she says it's all right to do what I want to do, so long as Billy never knows; and he won't know what I'm doing it for. That's the only thing he mustn't know. There's nothing to hinder, now that Sarah's reminded me of the address. I'll do it the very next time I go to the village."

CHAPTER XIII

A PUZZLE AND A PARTY

“FAIRY PUZZLE No. 1,” ran the legend printed on the end of the box in plain black type without any quirks, and below it, “Summo cum actu.”

“With much action,” mused Helen tossing aside the wrapper already half torn away in the mail. “I didn’t know before that fairies talked Latin.”

Except for the pasted label the box was all a soft shadowy green brushed over with plummy pine-needles and brown cones. A dull gold cord, twisted around it twice both ways, was held fast by a big blotch of yellow sealing-wax over the knot. Stamped on the wax gleamed a hand gripping a torch. Helen’s fingers itched to be at the seal.

“But it’s too pretty to break and I hate to cut the cord. Why, there’s something sticking out from under the wax!”

Dull-colored and Japanesey, a wee envelope came away like a brownish green leaf in her hands. “To be opened,” read the slight odd script, slighter and odder than ever, the letters

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huddled close on the tiniest imaginable sheet of smooth shiny paper where gay little fishes swam through the palest of pale green seas, "To be opened when the world is upside down, when there is a stone in your shoe and a snarl in your brain and your will is as wishy-washy as a cup of weak tea; but when Beggar Wind and King Sun and the blue Gypsy Sky are having what even you know for a big jubilant side-splitting frolic."

"That can't be to-day," Helen thought, "for Billy isn't going. He wouldn't say so for worlds, but I'm certain sure—almost—that he's changed his mind, and I don't dare somehow feel any way but glad, glad, glad to-day."

Very carefully she raised the box and shook it gently. "It doesn't jiggle like a picture puzzle. Besides, I don't believe the fairy godmother would be sending that kind. She's so—so unexpected. If I imagined till I'd worn my imaginer to a frazzle I'd never hit on the thing that's it. Outdoors comes in somehow; but for a picture puzzle she'd have said, wait for rain. Oh, Cousin Anne," skipping into the invalid's room, "just see what I've got now! And how can I ever wait to begin to put it together?"

"Pretty box," said Cousin Anne. "Quite the prettiest box I've seen. And how light! You don't suppose she's sending you one of those little fold-

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ing bonnets that are all mull and roses? It wouldn't do to get it wet, of course."

"But a thing to wear isn't exactly a puzzle, is it?"

"Some of them are. Where you get into them, you know, and how to hook yourself up is puzzling enough, I'm sure. But let's see. Would—— Nonsense! We mustn't risk spoiling the fairy's surprise by guesses."

"We couldn't, Cousin Anne, not if we guessed for a whole year."

Cousin Anne chuckled. "I hope you're not going to wait that long before looking inside this box. If you do, I shall peep. Here's fair warning. But before I forget to speak of it, my dear, I have been thinking that perhaps we ought to have the Frink girls to tea. Mary White invited you, too, last week, did she not? The four of you might have supper in the rose garden if the night were pleasant. How would you like to ask them for day after to-morrow?"

"I'm game, Cousin Anne. I beg your pardon. I mean I'd like it very much."

"Very well," said Cousin Anne. "I will speak to Mrs. Higgins. Jo goes to the village this afternoon. Send your invitations in any way you wish."

"I think I'll go around and ask them. They

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did that to me, you know.” Instinctively Helen’s mouth twitched a little at the corners. In day dreams she had always seen herself lavishly dispensing hospitality. As her prospective guests, May and Belle Frink began to take on interest. Mary White, though not aggressively amusing, she had liked. Mary was a still pale girl with an air that the Frinks called “real elegant” and Helen termed briefly “nice.” This fact, though she did not then think of it, was likely to contribute to the success of the party.

With a good will as cheerfully spick and span as her freshly laundered tan suit she delivered her invitations. The Frinks beamed and twittered their pleasure rather boisterously. Mary White accepted more quietly but with a sparkle of real gladness in her eyes.

After that there were orders to give for Mrs. Higgins, orders resulting from a most important consultation between the housekeeper and the hostess, during which Helen had gravely made choice between jellied and sliced chicken, tomato and fruit salad, strawberry shortcake and lemon ice. The thrilling responsibility of this encounter wrapped her straight girlish shoulders in a mantle of dignity as she addressed Mr. Frink.

Still Jo was not ready. Choosing from the rack a card that showed a glimpse of the gates at “Red

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Top," with the reluctant help of a spluttery store pen she printed in small black letters in the blank space :

"The ogre is beginning to pack his trunk. I didn't tell you half how wicked he was, for I didn't know myself. Don't worry, I have a fairy godmother to protect me. You will never dream what can happen in an enchanted castle until you live in one. How is the parlor ogre? And Mr. Dooley?"

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"There!" affixing a green stamp. "Now if that child doesn't write and say something about her precious brother Ted that will convince Billy Holbrook he really isn't half across the world, she won't be the nice little youngster I took her for. Of course Ted Babbitt might have run up into Vermont for just a week or so, but I'll bet Billy says that only because he wants him to be away in Europe. Coming, Jo!"

The party ought by rights to have gone off beautifully. It was a lovely afternoon. Helen herself had helped set the little table just big enough for four in a grassy corner of the rose garden, where a tall blushing Rambler shook petals over it. Not a single thing had she dropped except the roses strewn over the cloth the minute

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before a honk-honk from the gate sent her scampering through the house to dance out on the porch in delighted welcome as the White automobile drew up at the steps.

"Are we the first?" cried May Frink, with an eager glance around.

Helen laughed. "You're the first and the last, too. You're the party."

"Really?"

Right under Helen's eyes, as though somebody had blown out a candle, the vivacity died in May's face. It did not kindle again all the evening, though for just one instant a flicker of interest flared when she caught sight of the table. Her eyes traveled deliberately over the plates. One—two—three—four. Then it sank as quickly as it had risen, and a thin, cold, utterly disagreeable little smile settled about May's mouth.

That smile seemed to take Helen's happiness by the throat and choke it. Perhaps you would naturally be disappointed if you found a little party where you had expected a big one, she thought, but—but——

"Oh," sighed Mary White, in absolute untrammelled honesty. "Don't ask us to sit down! I couldn't eat a mouthful—yet. It's too pretty."

"I don't feel that way," said Belle. "I could begin with the roses and eat my way through the

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cloth just because it's so pretty, like one of those big frosted wedding cakes. Who did it?"

"I did."

"Lucky girl! My fingers are all thumbs when it comes to flowers. But then we haven't any place like this at home to set a table."

"I feel exactly," said Mary White, "like a person in a picture who has come to life."

Helen's eyes warmed. "Do you? That's the way I hoped you'd feel."

"It's so nice and cozy," cooed Belle.

"Particularly cozy," echoed May with emphasis.

"I am glad you like it," said Helen simply. "I love the gardens, and sometimes it seems a shame to have them all to myself. I feel like such a pig, you know, and just as though I'd got to go out and drag somebody in and say, 'Oh, isn't it lovely!'"

"Do you?" queried May. "I never should have dreamed it, and yet you don't have far to go."

"I don't think I quite understand."

"Some people like to keep people all to themselves, still ——"

"Now that's too bad, May," interrupted Belle. "Don't mind her, Helen. She's grouchy because she expected to meet Billy Holbrook up here. May's daft about Billy Holbrook. Don't you see a lot of him?"

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Disgust—cold, hard, shocked disgust—swept over Helen. Valiantly she tried to laugh off Belle's remark, but the joke rang flat. Mary began to talk very fast about the White Rocks, where the ice never melted all the year round, and had Helen been to the cave? Under Mary's compelling eyes even May Frink had something to say about the cave. Belle wanted to know if you were to say as fast as—something or other—what it would be? One of the boys had teased her because she always said "just as fast as anything." "What is anything, anyway?" he wanted to know. But all the time Helen ate without tasting, while her temper itched disdainfully, like a sword in its sheath.

"She's your guest," warned conscience.

"But she isn't polite," snapped temper.

"Polite or not, she's your guest," reiterated conscience, stupidly monotonous.

"Let her behave like one, then!" stormed temper. "And silly—— Oh!"

Aloud she said pleasantly, "The quickest thing I've seen lately is the way May and Billy Holbrook went around those tables at your party."

Have you ever experienced a revel where somebody felt disagreeable and let herself go, if only for a minute? The party never lived it down, of course. A party can laugh down stupidity, it can

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set little sticks of stiffness crackling into jolly little jokes, it can warm unacquaintance into the merriest of sociability, but plain downright nastiness rankles. Tired and torn and rumped, at the laggard stroke of nine, already hours overdue, Helen called good-night into the sweet summer darkness. Not particularly tired or torn or rumped to the sight. Outwardly she looked almost as trim as when her blithe welcome had rung from the same spot. But oh, what a difference inside!

"And I thought we'd have such fun!" she mourned, climbing the stairs to bed. "I never—never—never want another party as long as I live."

But all she said to Cousin Anne was, "I hope it's going to be a good day to-morrow, for I'm almost sure I shall need to play with the puzzle."

Cousin Anne smiled and drew her head down for a kiss. "Good-night, little gentlewoman," she said.

The words whispered like warm lips in her ear while, standing at the dainty dressing-table in the morning-glory room, Helen added six blue beads to the string in the little white box mother had given her.

"For there were six separate and distinct times," spearing the fourth bead resolutely, "when I thought I'd burst if I didn't say something horrid."

The warmth lingered even when like the flash

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of a colossal dark lantern a streak of lightning gleamed in her face and she woke to find the muslin curtains soaked by pelting rain. No stretch of fancy could conjure the morning that followed into fairy weather. In desperation that afternoon she climbed the wall and borrowed Harold, entirely recovered from the effects of the cooky jar and as diverting as three years of experience in the world can make a person. Billy wanted to come too, but Helen shook her head.

"You're too old, and you'd be in the way. Cousin Anne and I want somebody very new to play with to-day. We're lonesome."

"I'm new and lonesome both," Billy declared. "By new I suppose you mean fresh. I can be fresher'n Harold, if I try. Can't I, Bumps?"

"You can't be so little," taking an obdurate departure.

Somehow or other, she felt an absolute distaste for Billy to-day, a distaste that was not in the least like her feeling after his raid on the oak tree. That episode she thought she had a right to hold against him.

"But it isn't his fault that girls run after him," spoke up common sense. "Why do you care what they said? I hope you aren't going to spoil a perfectly good time because a girl happens to be silly."

"If he's lonesome, let him go and play with

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May Frink, then," pride retorted. "I don't want to have anything to do with him, not yet. Harold's plenty big enough for me."

And Harold, like a perfect little gentleman, did all and more than was expected of him. Climbing up beside Cousin Anne, he began by shaking hands and making Wiggy do the same, Wiggy being the best solace he knew for suffering. In five minutes he was chattering like a little magpie, turning on Cousin Anne and Helen a stream of cheerful information concerning himself, Wiggy, his new rocking horse, his sand pile, and his sensations after overindulging in cookies.

But you can't build block houses with the chubbiest of three-year-olds or tell him stories every hour of every day. And when days will persist in scowling ferociously for half a morning or marshaling a procession of thunder-storms across the sky of an afternoon or holding the sun provokingly just out of sight from dawn to dark till it seems as though by standing on tiptoe you must surely see him, there are a good many hours hard to dispose of. Helen studied the papers for the weather predictions and clutched her temper by both hands.

"For I mustn't get cross. I'll be sewing a wrinkle to my inside face and—— Oh, dear! I scowled then. I know I did. And the fairy god-mother likes my forehead smooth. Well, I guess

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I'll be good and ready for the fairy day if it ever does come."

And then when she had almost given up hope, even with the lovely green box in her hands; when she felt exactly as the letter said, only the world had turned a double somersault, and her shoes were chock full of pebbles, and if there was one there were a dozen snarls in her brain, and green tea was as firm as toast compared to the way her will felt—why, then it happened. A day all gold and green, with capering little winds that puffed soft white clouds across a sky so velvety blue that you wanted to snuggle your face in great armfuls of it, teasing winds that tugged at your feet till they could hardly keep still long enough for you to eat your breakfast.

Cousin Anne had not finished hers when Helen opened the puzzle on the foot of the invalid's bed, cutting the dull gold cord so as not to spoil the seal.

Tissue-paper. The box was full of it. Twist after twist came up in her hands. One tiny wad rolled off the bed and landed with the click of metal on the floor. Packages! Helen's fingers darted at the wrappers. A curious collection began to assemble on the counterpane. Everything was marked with a number inked on the minutest of tags. For everything was very small.

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"You take them in order," gasped the girl, throwing away the last paper, "but what on earth do you do with them?"

"That's the puzzle, I suppose." Cousin Anne pushed aside her breakfast tray. "I can't half see them, my dear, away down there."

In order Helen transported the collection. First, came a book no bigger than a postage stamp, the pages blank. Next, a sprig of balsam, and tied to it a tiny green scroll, lettered in gold, "O for a book and a shadie nook!" Those two fitted together. But number three was a miniature pail with a removable cover and a real wire handle, in all perhaps an inch high. There were six number threes identically alike.

"And cute! Oh, Cousin Anne!"

A doll's high laced tan boot flew a tag marked four, and a scrap of a Shetland pony hitched to a scrappier cart fluttered five from his bridle. On the strip of birch bark numbered six was plotted a rough map. Seven was nothing more than a bundle of little sticks.

"And this match came with them. That must stand for a fire," suggested Helen. "But what about eight?"

It was a kodak picture of the sphinx, silent and mysterious and half buried in sand.

"I don't see," she mused. "I don't see at all—

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unless it means riddle, just as in dumb crambo, last of all, you act out the whole word."

"That is a fair supposition to begin on," said the invalid.

"If we could only find out what the map says. Why, here's 'Red Top' just as plain as can be! Look, Cousin Anne!"

Cousin Anne looked at the map spread before her.

"*'Summo cum actu,'*" Helen quoted turning up the box cover. "With much action. And the arrows say 'Go,' and the road tells where—to the White Rocks," making a funny little face. "And the sticks say, 'Build a fire when you get there.' But what about the pails? Do they mean berrying?"

"What kind of pails are they?"

"Just pails. No, see the little things on top, with handles to them. Why, they're cups, only they won't come off. Dinner pails! But six of them! One is for me, I suppose, and the other five—I wish you could have one, Cousin Anne."

"You can't wish it more than I do, my dear."

"That naughty old ogre! How I hate him! Five—five—— There are just five Holbrooks. Do you suppose she means the Holbrooks?"

"I haven't much doubt of it. They seem to fit."

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Helen picked up the little tan shoe. "This means high boots, for it might be messy. Or does it mean walk? And the book and the bough say, 'Go where it will be shady and take a book, for you might like to read,' or—it's a blank book—maybe it's just for the story of the picnic. Which do you think? And the cart ought to mean drive, only there's the boot, and ——"

"Why not do both? But if the fairy godmother is telling you to go on a picnic to the White Rocks, with all the Holbrook family, I think you would better not set out after a Shetland pony. The bay span are used to mountain roads and Mr. Holbrook handles horses, I presume. Does the map have anything to say about where you take to your carriage?"

"There's a funny little quirk here, with legs to it. I do believe it's meant for a horse."

"Apple Corners." Cousin Anne inspected the birch bark. "Jo will meet you there with the horses, though why she doesn't let you either walk or ride the whole way I don't see. Mrs. Higgins will give you lunch enough. But if Molly wants to come over and help make sandwiches I presume nobody will object."

Helen swooped on the invalid with the rapturous hug modified just in time to the needs of sciatica. "Aren't you an angel, Cousin Anne! You

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don't mean, do you, that Mrs. Higgins will give us lunch enough for six!"

The keen eyes twinkled. "I hope she won't stop at five, my dear, because though Harold may be small, I perceive he has capacity. Run along, child, before the Holbrooks develop plans of their own."

Helen scampered over the wall so fast this time as almost to forget there was any mystery at all about either door or tree. One day Billy had asked, "What does Cousin Sci keep the gate locked for?" "To keep you out," Helen had answered promptly, and that was all the information Billy's wheedling had ever evoked.

"Bully F. G.," was his comment on the invitation. "Us-ums go, don't us, mumsie? Say us-ums go."

"The five of us—for a day in the woods—with a fairy godmother! Yes, Billy, I know you think it is all right, but ——"

"Oh, dear, I didn't explain well at all, Mrs. Holbrook!" Helen plunged in again.

"Going?" boomed Mr. Holbrook's deep rollicking voice. "Of course we're going, mother. Even if we haven't any fairy godmothers of our own we know how to treat invitations from other people's godmothers. They're like royalty, you can't refuse. Isn't that so, Molly?"

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But Molly was already slipping off her apron. "I'll be right over and help make the sandwiches," she said.

"Me, too," chirruped Billy. "Say, d'ye s'pose we'll met the old lady in the woods? Better take along your butterfly net, Moll."

"I don't know," laughed Helen, flying down the path. "You never can tell what she'll do."

CHAPTER XIV

PICNICKING

To the spirited bark of "three cheers and a tiger for the fairy godmother," executed by Billy, the guests set out on her picnic. Billy and Helen frisked ahead. Harold rode on his father's shoulder, joyously thumping sturdy little heels against his chest. Beside them trotted Mrs. Holbrook as easily as though Helen had not thought it polite to invite her to drive over this first lap with Jo and the lunch. Last of all came Molly, lagging now and then, and making up for it with light-footed spurts of swiftness.

"Come on. Don't hold up the party, Moll!" Billy charged into the group halted under a big maple.

"There! You've scared him," said Molly.

"Scared what? What was it?" Helen scampered back, craning her neck.

"A Maryland yellow throat, I thought, didn't you, father?"

"Oh, for a bird, a screechy scrotchy bird!" chanted Billy capering down the road with his

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head laid against his spine at a dizzy angle that sent him tumbling and bounding for half a rod to recover his balance.

"I didn't see any bird," said Helen.

"Of course not, Seesaw. You haven't been to college yet. That's another little trick they teach you, how to start for somewhere and get held up by a bird under the first tree. I say, let's yell! To scare off the feathers, you know. With two such bird fiends along as the Pater and Moll we'll never get anywhere if we don't."

Helen, busy seeing which could puff harder, she or a little vagrant breeze, scarcely heard him. Everything looked so happy, she thought. Along the edges of the meadows lilies rang in midsummer with slender orange and yellow bells. Delicate films of Queen Anne's lace spread over the fields. A riotous company of buttercups, early mulleins, hardhack, and elder crowded against the fences. Yellow butterflies fluttered under foot in the brown road. And below, cupped in high blue hills, the valley almost gurgled, so cool and green and inviting did it look, like a giant's jade drinking bowl. The skip in her toes mounted up, up, up, as the bubbles rose in the spring at "Red Top."

"Oh, Billy," she said, "aren't you glad you didn't die of measles when you were four? It's so perfectly gorgeously glorious to be alive!"

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"I didn't have 'em when I was four," objected Billy. "Six and three-quarters. And you bet I made a jolly fuss, too. No measles for me if rowing could help it."

Now they were passing the strawberry patch and the girl waved to a sunbonnet bending over a long row of plants. "I wish she could go too!"

The next minute Helen was inside the fence. "We're going on a picnic," she cried to Sarah Stuart. "Couldn't you possibly come?"

"Take a day off," urged Billy, loyally seconding his chum.

The girl smiled out of depths of pink gingham. "I'd like to, but Mrs. Frink wants a dozen baskets by noon, and I promised I'd try to have them ready. It's hard picking at the tail end of a season."

Billy turned on his heel and bolted.

"Six pairs of hands work faster than one," said Mr. Holbrook a minute later from the end of the row. "Where are our baskets, young lady? I offer a pipe-of-Pan whistle to the picker who fills the first basket."

Sarah Stuart's remonstrances met deaf ears. Everybody was reaching for a basket and hurrying away to a hopeful-looking row. How they picked! Mrs. Holbrook, in handfuls, economizing motions; Molly, with cool deft ease on the

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pattern of her mother; Billy, pawing the leaves like a frolicsome puppy but securing an astonishing amount of fruit; Helen, one at a time and in such breathless haste that she dropped every third berry; Mr. Holbrook, with a steady dexterity that still left him one eye for Harold. Mother Holbrook won the whistle and promised Helen the first toot. Before anybody dreamed it could be time, the baskets were filled, a triumphant procession had streamed up to the house, and joking and laughing had borne Sarah Stuart off to the covered three-seater waiting with Jo and the bays at the next turn in the road.

Molly and Sarah climbed into the back seat, Mrs. Holbrook with Billy and Harold adorned the middle, and Helen spread the birch bark map on her knee beside the driver.

From the road Jo grinned through his haze of freckles. "There's a hatchet for cuttin' fire-wood. And the horses' feed is ready for 'em in two bags. I guess you'll manage to make out somehow."

The horses shook their heads and pranced a little, just to show they too were in picnicking mood. Mr. Holbrook glanced back over his shoulder—"Everybody ready?"—and took up the reins.

"Good-bye, Jo, good-bye! Sorry you're not coming along. Tell Cousin Anne it's perfectly great!"

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"Joseph, Joseph, how can I part with thee!" sang Billy in a high falsetto, leaning in a despairing attitude over the wheel.

"Don't be a monkey on a stick," Molly adjured him. "Jo isn't used to your foolishness."

"That kind don't take much learnin'," called Jo, waving his rusty straw.

The bays kicked their heels high after the manner of the morning, for all the world as though they were not steady old mountain horses who knew every foot of the road as well as they knew the taste of oats. Their hoofs boomed across plank bridges spanning small gurgling brooks and thudded briskly beside the willowy course of a little river where white clouds sailed a winding blue lane. Soon, freakish as a kitten, the road veered from the water and plunged down a cool green tunnel with twinkling yellow sunbeams playing at hide and seek among shaggy brown tree trunks. But before anybody had ceased exclaiming the horses stretched their necks to a hill all blazing gold light, and at the top dipped as suddenly into a pine wood pungent with fragrance where the hoofs went as softly as though they were treading on velvet.

It was noon when at the last turn on the map Billy swung a high barred gate into a mountain pasture. Bumpity bump, the wagon bounced over the stones in the narrow rutty apology for a road.

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At the edge of the woods even the apology stopped short, abruptly, absolutely, and there seemed to be nothing anywhere but trees and sweet fern bushes and towering brakes.

"Haven't we made a mistake?" asked Mother Holbrook.

"The path leads away through those bushes," Sarah Stuart reassured her.

While Father Holbrook attended to the horses the rest made a dash for the lunch baskets. In single file with arms full they struck into the faint ferny trail, Billy heroically yielding Helen the lead because it was her fairy godmother who was giving the picnic. Fifteen minutes of dodging expectancy and the last detaining bough let them out on the open mountainside. With a whoop Billy deposited his burden and went bounding, chamois-like, up the rough slope. After him sped Helen, more slowly, stopping every now and then to emit chirps of delight as she raced over the huge gray-lichened rocks. From far above poured the torrent of boulders, surging against the woods in wild confusion.

"Feel it! Feel it!" squealed Helen skipping back and forth like a crazy girl. "Now I'm hot, and now I'm cold —— Did you ever!"

Molly and Sarah Stuart were beside her in an instant.

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"And plates! My eye, but we're elegant!"

"Here it's as warm as out in the pasture," cried Molly. "And here," springing to the next rock, "br-r-r-r! Please somebody lend me an overcoat!"

"And just three tiny steps between," Helen gasped. "Ouch! Ouch! How my teeth chatter!"

"See the ice down there?" Sarah Stuart pointed under the ledges of the rock. "It never melts all the year round. On the hottest summer day folks come here and find cold blasts blowing from that ice the same as they do now."

"It's like an air sandwich." Helen began to skip more madly. "The cold in between the hot, and you never can tell — Why, what's that?"

Following her pointing finger the picnickers encountered a prosaic businesslike object set high on a broad flat ledge. In the midst of this wild jumble of rock and wood, grazing delicate mosses and ferns watered by trickling streams of melting ice, shadowed by huge forest trees, out of sight and sound, almost out of memory of houses and towns, stood—an ice-cream freezer. The jaunty red and green label still stuck to its smooth gray side. By it lay a bag of salt. A tag was tied to the bail.

"Bunny whickets!" Billy backed abruptly up to Helen. "Pinch me, Seesaw! Pinch me!"

"But where did it come from?" cried Sarah Stuart. "It can't have been left here all night, or

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it wouldn't look so fresh—and there's cream in it, cream! It's all ready to freeze! What on earth!"

Helen clasped her hands. "Didn't I say you couldn't ever tell what she'd do?" But her brain whirled.

"She? Who's she?"

"I know," grinned Billy. "The F. G. But I'll bet I know another thing, too—why Joseph put in that hatchet."

Helen did not hear him. She was on her knees examining the tag. On it a grinning little brown elf swung his legs from a tiny brown toadstool.

And then like a flash she understood. Oh, what an imbecile she had been to be taken in so completely by Cousin Anne's surprise! She, the sinner, had pretended not to know anything more than Helen about the puzzle. Of course she was in the secret. Perhaps she hadn't been in it all along, but she was now. How else could the ice-cream freezer have come here? Unless—a doubt assailed the girl's conclusions—unless it was Jo who was in the confidence of the mysterious lady whose identity Helen knew in the depths of her heart was no mystery at all. How could she help knowing the roads when she used to live here? she thought.

While everybody stood about declaring in varying phrases that of course things would happen at

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a fairy picnic that couldn't anywhere else, Billy jumped down among the rocks and began chopping ice and stuffing it into a burlap bag that he had found wrapped around the hatchet. And then and there right out in the wilds they made ice-cream. Billy and Helen packed the freezer with ice and salt and everybody gave a turn to the crank just to say they had all helped, Harold offering a ready little tongue when the beater was withdrawn.

If you have never cooked and eaten your dinner in the woods you can have all the fun of doing it, like Helen, for the first time, though of course if you happen to be a very near relative of Little Miss Muffett you may notice drawbacks.

The Holbrooks and Sarah Stuart, being old hands, and no kin at all to Miss Muffett, knew exactly how to go about it. In three minutes Father Holbrook had a fire crackling where the smoke would go up a kind of natural chimney. Mrs. Holbrook and Sarah investigated the lunch hampers. Coffee tied in little muslin bags went into pails slung on a pole above the fire and soon a spicy odor spread over the rocks. They laid the table on a big flat boulder, tree-shaded, covering it with a gay tissue lunch cloth that caused Billy to inquire pathetically if somebody would please tell him, was this the Waldorf Astoria?

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Olive bottles punctuated piles of sandwiches, sliced tongue, cake, and cookies. Butter, salt, and sugar sat about handily. Little meat pies, slipped for a minute to an end of hot rock from which the fire had been raked, steamed in a way to make your mouth water.

The fact that others than the seven chosen feasters helped themselves seemed to disturb nobody. When spiders fell into the cream bottle, Billy fished them out and spread them on mulberry leaves to dry. Molly stopped in the middle of a sandwich to cheer a valiant black ant making off with a particularly corpulent crumb of cake.

"It isn't every day they get a picnic," she expostulated. "Do let them enjoy it in peace, Helen. How would you like to have a giant all the time shooing you away from that meat pie?"

When a tiny brown hopper came along and Helen jumped and dropped her potato, freshly raked from the ashes and done to such a turn that it broke its jacket and showered everybody with hot white flakes, they only laughed. Helen herself laughed, and twisted her neck to look after the little brown visitor, while she helped herself to a fresh potato and a slice of Molly's wonderful toast.

For Molly had cut a branch from a young birch, stripped off the leaves and twisted together the twigs, plaiting in fresh ones, until she had the

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most fascinating toaster Helen had ever seen in her life, large enough to hold nearly a dozen slices at a time. Even Sarah, who had picnicked ever since she was "knee high to a grasshopper," had known nothing like it.

"There's only one thing the F. G. forgot," said Billy. "A fellow wishes she'd arranged to have his skin three times too big for him."

"Mercy!" Molly exclaimed. "Isn't yours elastic enough? Three slices of toast, four meat pies, and as many potatoes, and I wouldn't dare guess how many sandwiches—not to speak of——"

"Don't mention it," Billy interrupted. "'Tisn't manners to talk about what you eat. Anyway, your house is sort of glassy, Moll. Don't I see another sandwich over there?"

"And two cookies!" Helen cried.

"One more meat pie," laughed Sarah.

"Couldn't you help out on this potato?" gravely suggested his father.

Everything eatable began moving toward Billy. "Send 'em along," agreed that youth tranquilly. "Anything that Moll's little friends don't want."

But the best was yet to come, for nothing that anybody could ever remember eating had had the exotic flavor of that ice-cream made in the green midsummer woods with ice chopped on the spot.

"It's like eating miracles," Helen averred.

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"As though the calendar had run off the track," suggested Father Holbrook, "and January had telescoped July."

"The F. G.'s a scorcher." Billy passed his saucer for a third filling. "Wish somebody'd introduce me to mine."

"Do you think she could beat this?" asked Molly.

"I'd like to see her try. Two's better than one. Just fasten your mind on a summer run by a pair of 'em, Moll."

"We might let the last person through eating clean up," remarked Molly naughtily, laying down her spoon.

"Fire away. You can't scare me that easy," grinned Billy. "Seesaw's still game, I see."

In the end they all lent a hand and signs of the feast vanished swiftly. The Holbrooks prided themselves on leaving a picnic ground with only the blackened circle of their fireplace to tell later comers that a party had passed that way. When the baskets were stacked and the last papers were rapidly becoming charred flakes and everybody felt lazy and warm and like nothing so much as dropping down where he stood and taking a nap, Mrs. Holbrook drew out a book.

"That's what I forgot!" cried Helen. "And she said to bring one, too."

PICNICKING

When you can lie flat on your back on the mossy side of a rock, one hand under your head and the other snuggled around a chubby three-year-old—having made sure there are no toads about—and look through waving green plumes into a blue, blue sky, all the while a low pleasant voice is relating the adventures of a hamadryad who lost her tree and didn't know where to find it—you ought, Helen felt, to be satisfied inside and out.

The story ran somewhat in this fashion :

One day a wandering wind went piping through the forest. It piped to the flowers and they nodded ; it piped to the birds and they sang. Sturdy old trees that had endured for scores of years liked its piping and shook their leaves in applause. A very little hamadryad, who lived in a very little tree, went wild with joy. She slipped out of her tree and danced up and down hand in hand with a jolly little branch. But the piping sounded so gay and glad that soon she let go her hold of the branch and danced after the music. On and on she went through the forest, following the wind. And then suddenly the piping ceased and the little hamadryad looked up to find herself among strange trees whose leaves twinkled in a language that she did not understand. And she

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knew no better than when she set out where the wind blew to, poor lost baby dryad.

Then the wood creatures bestirred themselves. The rabbits took her to their burrows and the woodchucks shared their holes with her. The foxes and the bears helped until she should be old enough to go through the forest hunting for her tree. But when she was old enough she did not look in the least like the baby dryad who had lost it. Then she had been small and pink with a funny little brush of pale colored hair. Now she was tall, moving like the rippling of a leafy bough, and she had great brown eyes and hair that blew in clouds over her green gown, hair just the color of bark. And she remembered nothing about her tree except that it was small and slender, and that did her very little good for it, too, must have grown.

"When in doubt, ask," said the wood creatures who had succored her.

So she set her face to go through the forest asking everybody, "Have you seen a tree without any dryad?"

"A tree without any dryad? There's no such thing," answered a white birch. "Or stay, once a wind told me—was it West Wind or East? Yes, my dear, I think there is such a tree, but really where it is I can't tell you."

PICNICKING

"We heard of one the year before last," the violets said, "from a zephyr who had it from a thistle-down. Perhaps the hepaticas could tell you, they're up so early they get most of the news."

"Yes," replied the hepatica leaves sagely. "There is such a tree, but we have never seen it. We have never seen anybody who has seen it. Ask the robins, they ought to know."

The robins sent her to the angleworms and the angleworms to the snails and the snails to the ants, and every one confirmed the same story. There was a tree without a dryad, but where nobody could quite tell.

"But cheer up! Cheer up!" called the robins. "You'll find it."

"Home—sweet-sweet-sweet!" sang the veeries.

What should she do? All she knew was that rumor said somewhere in the big wood her tree was waiting.

Mrs. Holbrook closed the book over one finger and settled her shoulders more comfortably against a mossy boulder. "You may take turns in making up endings," she said. "Molly!"

Harold lay fast asleep, curled up like a kitten. Carefully, so as not to disturb him, Helen rolled over on her side, where she could watch the storyteller.

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“ ‘When in doubt, ask,’ ” quoted Molly. She put out her hand and picked up a little green inchworm. “One day, the dryad met a green worm. ‘Oh, Mr. Inchworm,’ she said, ‘can you tell me the way back to my tree?’”

“ ‘Inch! Inch!’ said the worm. ‘Inching is the only way I get anywhere.’ ” Helen could see quite distinctly the slender green flame humping itself across Molly’s hand. “ ‘My friend Mr. Tree Toad may be able to advise you further.’ ”

“ ‘Oh, Mr. Tree Toad,’ ” Molly’s fingers closed on a small mottled gray creature, “ ‘can you tell me the way back to my tree?’ ”

“ ‘Hop! Hop!’ squeaked Mr. Tree Toad. ‘Hop hard! You can’t miss it if you hop long enough. But you might speak to my friend, Miss Arachne.’ ”

Molly held up a spider swinging at one end of an invisibly slender thread. “ ‘Oh, Miss Arachne, can you tell me the way back to my tree?’ ”

“ ‘Spin! Spin! Spin every day. You can always get back where you came from if you follow your thread.’ ”

“So the dryad inched and hopped and spun, never missing a day, until she came to a part of the forest that looked like nothing she could ever remember except in dreams. Squirrels were busy doing their fall hauling, and she stopped one of them.

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“‘Oh, Mr. Squirrel, can you tell me where to find my tree?’

“‘Three oaks to the left and one to the right—skip the chestnut,’ chattered the squirrel. ‘It’s been waiting for you a long while. I shouldn’t wonder if you’d find tenants. Good-day!’

“So the dryad came to her tree, and sure enough she found tenants, the great-great-great-grandson of whom”—Molly pounced on a nimble lizard—“has told me this story. Your turn, Sarah.”

“The dryad felt pretty forlorn when she started out with a whole forest ahead of her,” said Sarah slowly. “The very first thing she did, I think, when all the wood creatures spoke such discouraging words to her was to sit down and cry. The next thing was to plan out her search. ‘Crying never found a tree,’ she said. ‘I’ll go to the east and the north and the west and sooner or later I’ll strike the right place. But I won’t ask anybody else because I’ve asked enough to be sure they don’t know, and it would just mix me up for nothing.’ So she began her search and she kept at it day after day, spring and summer and fall, but in winter she curled up under the leaves and slept soundly till the hepaticas woke her by poking their woolly nightcaps out of bed. It took a long while and was hard work, but when she found it

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the tree made up for everything. Mine is a pretty short story, I'm afraid."

"Not half so short as mine will be," grinned Billy. "Dry goes snooping around as glum as a last year's mullein stalk until she comes to a tree that looks good enough to camp out under. The tree never had a thingummy like her inside it and hadn't ever calculated on having one, but this seemed a good enough sort as dryads go. 'Come along up,' says the tree, 'if you like.'"

"'Don't mind if I do,' says Dry. 'What's the diff? One tree's as good as another.' So up she goes. Cut in, Seesaw."

"The dryad didn't see what she could do in that big forest to find her tree all by herself when nobody seemed to know very well where it was," Helen began shyly. "But she thought maybe if she started out and did her best something would happen to help her. Now the dryad had a ——"

"Fairy godmother," cried Billy.

"No interruptions allowed," said Mr. Holbrook.

"Do dryads have fairy godmothers? Then this dryad had a fairy godmother. But she didn't know it. She didn't hear a little voice saying over and over, 'Put on your spectacles! Put on your spectacles! Put on your spectacles!' until all at once she found she had them on, and then she caught the tiniest tail end of a whisper. The

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spectacles looked exactly as though they were cut out of the corner of a rainbow, all glimmery shimmering colors, and yet the dryad could see through them perfectly well and see things she had never dreamed of seeing before. Balancing on the bowl of an Indian pipe stood the fairy godmother. She spread gauzy dragon-fly wings and flew straight to the dryad's shoulder. 'Read the name-plates on the doors,' she said, 'and talk to all the winds. There isn't much of anything a wind can't tell you if he chooses.'

"And then the dryad with the fairy spectacles saw that on every tree there was a name-plate just as there is on lots of houses. There were signs too. Some said, 'To Rent,' and some, 'For Sale,' and some 'Wanted, a family for the winter,' but not one said, 'Lost—a hamadryad.'

"A great many winds came along, big bluff, gusty winds and steady up-tearing winds, cross cold winds and warm flowery winds, fresh frisky winds and little soft skippery ones, and of every one of them the dryad asked, 'Did you ever hear of a wind that piped a baby dryad away from her tree, and which way was he blowing?' Even the cross winds were polite because of the fairy godmother, and though they had pretended not to know anything about her tree before, they knew all about it now. 'Keep on just the way we're go-

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ing,' or 'Your tree's just the other way,' they would say, and then the dryad would push on against them or turn and let them help her along faster than fast. And all the time she read the names on the door-plates until she came to a tree that stood so straight and tall and shook out its shining leaves so far that she wished—oh, how she wished—it was her tree. But the name-plate, 'Miss Sylvia Hamadryad,' fairly sparkled and it didn't look a bit like a tree that was deserted and empty. Then the fairy godmother said, 'What's on that leaf?' And the dryad looked through the fairy spectacles and saw pricked on the leaf a letter. It was a very little letter. It read, 'Please, hamadryad, come home. Your tree has cleaned house and is waiting.'

"Then the hamadryad knocked on the trunk and it swung open and she stepped over the root threshold into her very own tree again."

"That's good enough to end with," said Mr. Holbrook. "Who wants to see what happens beyond that rock?"

"If we find a dryad," Molly called over her shoulder, "we'll send her down to you, mother."

Sarah Stuart, climbing beside Helen, turned on her a happy face. "We don't have to find a dryad, do we? Only her hair isn't brown."

"Isn't she the loveliest thing you ever saw?" Helen whispered back. "Oh, hear her laugh!"

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"The one I'm going to is her college," said Sarah, "and she's told me to apply right off. The waiting list is made up years ahead. She thinks I can get a scholarship after freshman year. That would help a lot. If I couldn't I guess I wouldn't be worth educating. I begin picking raspberries to-morrow—up on the mountain. I'm so glad you asked me to come! It's been a day to live on for months, to take out next winter, when the thermometer's twenty below zero, and we're buried in snow, and just gloat over."

Helen did not wait for winter to begin to gloat. But because her thoughts were so dreamily, translucently happy, Billy's words cut like blunt blundering shears across a pile of floss silk and roughened them into sudden dismayed confusion. They had carried the empty pails and hampers into the kitchen at "Red Top." At the door Billy turned back, the mischievous imp looking out of his eyes. "I've got my ticket," he told her.

"Your ticket—what ticket?"

"To the Junction. Haven't bought beyond that yet. Didn't I tell you I'd heard of a summer job? Place where a fellow can earn enough to keep him going—and a little more."

"I don't believe it."

"You don't! Maybe you'll say that when I show you the letter."

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"I don't believe you've bought your ticket," Helen explained.

"What's that but a ticket?" Billy extended his hand, an oblong of printed cardboard in his palm. "Remember what I told you, Miss Over-the-Wall. When I—got—good—and—ready ——"

"Just the same," thought the girl, hurrying off to tell Cousin Anne of the day's adventures, "I don't believe a word of it. Molly said her mother had to go to the Junction pretty soon. That ticket's for her, most likely. Billy is just talking to scare me."

CHAPTER XV

THE WISH EXCHANGE

“Do you suppose I could raise something—something that would sell, I mean?”

The question, fired out of five full minutes of abstraction iron-clad to the point of deafness, brought Cousin Anne's keen eyes to instant attention.

“Mercy, child! Sheep or cabbages?”

Helen considered the question, a little smile tucked away at the corners of her mouth. “Sheep would be just a tiny bit difficult for a girl, wouldn't they? I must have meant cabbages. Of course I've always been going to earn money, but Sarah Stuart's mushrooms make me fairly itch to begin. Not little teenchy bits of money, five cents or ten for minding the Loomis' baby an hour, or even half a dollar for keeping the Pages' pansies picked the month they're away, but whole lumps of money!” spreading out her arms. “What do you think would be a good way to begin, Cousin Anne?”

Cousin Anne parried the question with another.

“What do you want to do with the money?”

Squirring her way deeper into the big wicker

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chair and cupping her chin in her hands, Helen settled down for the thing she loved, a speculative talk.

"First I'm going to do what Sarah's doing. I'm going to college. I did think I'd earn as I went along—you read about so many people doing that—but Molly says Sarah's way is much better, at least I ought to have something saved ahead so as not to do too much earning while I'm studying. I'd have to skip so much of the worthwhileness because I hadn't any time for it, you see, and then if I worked summer vacations, too, I'd have to be strong as an ox or it would rip the tuck out of me. Isn't that a funny expression, Cousin Anne? Molly heard Sarah say it. I said I was strong as a calf, anyway, and I thought she'd never stop laughing. You see after freshman year I can get a scholarship. But I really do think I'd better lay by a few hundreds before I start. Doesn't that sound grand? A few hundreds! Cousin Anne, I feel like a plutocrat whenever I think of 'em."

"So I see. Meanwhile—— But didn't you say college was only your first investment?"

"Oh, yes, for after I get out of college there'll be quantities of things to do. I'm going to help Floyd and Phillis give mother just everything she wants. You can't think how she's scrimped

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and gone without and worn brown when she wanted to wear blue, because the brown things came in a box of cast-offs that somebody sent, and how she's squeezed her eyes tight shut on the flower catalogues. The house will have to be painted, and probably we'll all go abroad and —— Oh, quantities of things! But mother says the first thing for us to do is to study hard and learn all we can with the chances we have or can make. Then we'll be ready to do our part in the world honorably and happily, wherever we are, whether it's in a big spandy dry house or a shabby old leaky one—only of course we're not going to live all our days with the paint flaking off the way it does now." The rush of words ended breathlessly.

"You look as though you enjoyed the prospect."

"Oh, I do. It's perfectly great planning what you're going to do! Only—you see mother thinks my ideas are all too big. I can tell by her smile. It's that way about my going to college. She says I mustn't set my heart on it so hard that I can't pry it off. What is the fun of wanting if you don't want hard?"

"I believe there is a prudent theory to the effect that mild desires entail softer knocks than the other kind. Would it be inquisitive of me to in-

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quire a little more closely into your definition of cabbages? ”

“ Cabbages? Oh, yes. But I don’t know exactly myself. That’s what I wanted to ask you about, Cousin Anne. Mother says you have such fine business judgment. Embroidery,” she made up a funny little face, “and lots of things other girls do, I’m no good at. When Floyd made and sold jig-saw puzzles two or three winters ago I helped stick on the pictures. It was great fun and I cut a few puzzles myself, but it really was Floyd’s business. If only I could invent something cute and funny that everybody would want to buy the way they wanted to buy those puzzles! But when I try to think up something my brains go round and round like kittens chasing their tails and never get anywhere. Once I—I—the twins like my stories, you know, and”—flushing hotly—“I expect you’ll think it was too nervy for anything, Cousin Anne, but I wrote one of them out, and copied it the way they say you ought, as plain as I knew how, on one side of the paper only, and sent it to a magazine.”

“So did I—once,” said Cousin Anne. “They returned mine with a printed slip.”

“Saying not to be discouraged, maybe somebody else would want it?”

The invalid nodded.

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“And did you believe it, Cousin Anne, did you?”

“For a while. Then I stopped.”

“It takes so many stamps,” sighed Helen, “and they keep telling you to persevere. And you’re scared for fear somebody will find it out. You have to fairly haunt the mails, and the big brown envelopes look so sick.”

“The thing inside looks sicker,” remarked Cousin Anne.

From the arm of the wicker chair two blue eyes surveyed her contentedly. “I do think you’re the very most satisfactory person to talk with I ever met.”

“Thank you, my dear. I might tell you that probably a quarter of the people you meet have that kind of skeleton stowed away in their closets. I remember chatting for half an hour with three people who looked as innocent of it as gamboling lambs. Something switched the talk into the right channel, and, believe it, not a soul of us four but knew by experience the printed slip.”

“I haven’t so very many,” Helen explained. “It seemed as though in spite of all the articles about ‘try, try again’ maybe I’d better put off trying until I grew up.”

“My dear, the more I see you the more I am impressed with the fact that you are an extremely sensible girl.”

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"Really! How nice of you!"

"The girl you are is very like the girl I used to be, and she never quite grew up, so perhaps I am prejudiced. But," smiling a little, "a woman of business judgment and a sensible girl ought to be able to achieve something in the line of 'cabbages.' I must think. Do you wish to retain me as your confidential adviser?"

"Are your fees very high? I mustn't go in debt to start with."

"Seeing you are you, and that I am already somewhat in your debt, perhaps I might waive the point of fees."

Helen flew out of her chair with a jump that shoved it against a stand bearing a tall vase of lilies. For ten tottering seconds, held in a spell of horrified petrification, she watched them. Then the lilies careened beyond her rescuing hand and clashed to the floor.

"Cousin Anne! Oh, Cousin Anne!—What are you laughing at?"

"You looked so funny, my dear. I beg your pardon, but sometimes—only sometimes—you are the funniest thing I ever saw in my life!"

"Billy thinks so all the time," sighing. "He calls me a howling joke. Did that girl you were drop things?"

"Quantities of 'em. Her brothers nicknamed

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her 'Dropsy,' and laughed at her just as I do at you till she learned it was better to laugh than to cry over spilt milk."

Slowly Helen gathered up the broken pottery and replaced the lilies in another jar. "But, Cousin Anne, I broke your vase, and most likely it cost a lot more money than I've got in my purse."

"As it happens, I picked it up on a ten cent counter, lured by its color. I'm not saying but that you might break things I'd cry over. Please don't."

Swift as sunshine after rain, a smile flashed over Helen's face. "Only ten cents? Oh, goody! I was afraid it was dollars and dollars. But, do you know, the more I think about it and try not to, the more things I seem to drop! Mother says I'll outgrow it and meanwhile I must try to hold myself together and look where I'm going and step high so as not to trip. But it's tiresome being patient while you wait for yourself to grow up. Though I'm not half so cross as I was when I came, do you think I am?"

"You have proved a first rate little nurse. I could ask no better."

"Have I, honestly? I must write that to mother. Only I had to sort of pull it out of you, didn't I?"

Cousin Anne laughed. "I shall write your

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mother this afternoon, myself, to tell her that I am on the up grade and to thank her for lending me a streak of her sunshine."

"It's all the fairy godmother with her funny little inside face," said Helen humbly. "When you once know about it you can't catch a glimpse of yourself in a mirror without wondering how it looks and whether you're doing all you can to make it pretty. Cousin Anne, for the longest while I've had a letter in my head all written to her. Do you suppose I might send it?"

"People have done such things, my dear."

"But where should I direct? Of course I'm not silly enough to write 'Fairy Godmother' and send it by United States mail, even if her letters do come postmarked and stamped and delivered by the R. F. D. man."

"I don't suppose it makes much difference where you post them, seeing that she is a fairy. Why not any hollow tree or handy stump, or even last year's bird's nest?"

Helen's eyes dwelt on Cousin Anne's for a long inquiring minute.

An hour afterward, almost too excited to talk, she dropped down by the invalid's lounging chair.

"I wrote her," she gasped, "that I just adored knowing about her and how I loved her letters and the puzzle and what a dandy picnic we had, and I

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posted the letter in—in that old oak the other side of the gardens. And a minute ago I went down and put my hand in and it's gone—Cousin Anne, my letter is gone ! ”

“ Gone ! ”

“ Billy was up-stairs all the time,” Helen rushed on. “ I asked Molly. He's not feeling very well, I think, but I didn't stop to see what's the matter. Anyway it wasn't he who took it.”

“ She doesn't lose time,” murmured Cousin Anne. “ Speaking of fairies, the postman stopped while you were at the Holbrooks'.”

Helen pounced on the square, heavy envelope. Cousin Anne evidently meant to keep the fairy godmother's counsels.

For a long exquisitely tortured minute curiosity held back from satisfaction, while eyes crossed t's and rounded every quirky flourish. Just to touch a fairy godmother's letter was delight. The thrill caught Helen under the arm and prickled up and down her spine until she was all one tingling anticipation.

And then —— And then ——

The letter began without any inky salutations.

“ Book of reed, and book of horn,
Apple seed and apple thorn—
By this tune,
Magic rune,

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Chanted once, chanted twice,
Chanted faster, chanted thrice
Speak me fair, tell me true
What for me the fates will do.

"Did you ever play pretend? Did you ever sit down with an armful of wants and poke them over and over with your thoughts and wonder, supposing a fairy should come along and grant you three wishes, which wants you could possibly get along without? But of course you have. Hasn't everybody? Only—now—it—has—come—true. Don't jump. Didn't suppose such things happened nowadays? Certainly they happen, when a person has wit enough to put on her spectacles and read her godmother's writing.

"Only—*be careful!* I am shaking my finger at you, goddaughter. Be careful. And obey the rules of the game.

"I. You may wish for a hoop of pearls set with diamonds if you like, but you must not wish for the moon.

"II. You may ask for the plaything of a day or the satisfaction of a lifetime, a hat for your head or clothing for your heart, food for your body or bread for your brain, but you may not wish over and you must not cry, if when you get it you do not like what you have wished for.

"III. You may date a wish as you wind an

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alarm clock, set to go off when you choose and for whom you choose at any time within five years.

“IV. When you have fixed on three wishes, find a thorn apple tree standing alone on a hillside sloping to the east. Walk three times around the tree chanting the rhyme that heads this letter, ‘Book of reed and book of horn,’ etc. Sitting under the north branches write your wishes as briefly and plainly as possible on a sheet of pink paper. Enclose this in a pink envelope addressed

Wish Exchange

Fairyland

Department of Godmothers

Post it under a flat stone which you will find three paces to the south of the tree. Walk away without looking back and do not return to the tree until you receive notification of the receipt of your wishes.

“If to-day were five years from now, and you had had all the things you are hoping for in that time, which three would you be least willing to have done without?”

The breath whistled between Helen’s teeth.

“If,” she gasped, “if it wasn’t to-day at all, and I’d had everything—everything—that I’m hoping

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for in five whole years —— But what am I hoping for? I'm expecting to eat and drink and wear clothes and have a reasonable amount of fun and finish high school and—and have mother well again, of course—that really comes first. And I'm hoping—oh, I'm hoping to earn a lot of money and go to college and get things for mother and learn how to keep my temper and not to trip and smash and drop things. Or am I expecting some of those things and hoping some of the others? I don't have to hope mother will get well, do I? Isn't she surely going to? And maybe I'm expecting not to be Crosspatch since the fairy godmother's letters began to come.

“And then—why, if I could have anything I wanted in five whole years, anything a fairy could give, I wouldn't stop with things like that, I wouldn't stop at all. There are millions of wants I'd have. I can't think of 'em all at once, but I can feel 'em. I'd stand on the tiptoppest pyramid and watch the caravans crawl away over the desert —— Or does everything go by railroad now, Cousin Anne? And I'd bury my hands in a great heap of diamonds and pearls and rubies and emeralds just as you do in sand on the seashore and watch the trickles of flashing color run off my arms in little slithery streams of rainbow light. I'd fix up the house and give mother all she wants

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right now and season tickets to everything that happens and a garden —— Oh, what a garden ! ”

“ The fairy godmother ought to have given you thirty wishes instead of three,” said Cousin Anne. “ So far as her letter reads you can take the pyramids, if you want them more than something else. Or you might wish for the jewels, I suppose, and by selling them, get most of the other things.”

A puckered forehead puzzled over this suggestion. “ That doesn’t seem exactly what Billy calls ‘ on the square,’ does it ? ”

“ Not exactly, but it is sometimes done. However, I respect your judgment.” The shrewd eyes watched for a couple of minutes while deeper perplexity clouded the girl’s face. “ What is the matter now ? ”

“ I’m not quite sure ; but I’ve just thought maybe I ought not to really choose. Why, if I should choose as she says the things I want most, they’d be too big. Don’t you see how big they’d be ? I love to pretend, and she makes it all seem so real I forget half the time that she’s not —— ”

“ Stop ! ” cried Cousin Anne. “ Stop quickly before you say anything you might be sorry for.”

Helen swallowed hard. “ You know what I mean.”

“ Yes, I know what you mean.”

“ When I just think of the letters, I could write

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anything—anything. It's all the beautifullest game that ever was dreamed of. But sometimes my mind goes poking around to what must be back of the letters, though I try not to let it, and then — Oh, Cousin Anne, oughtn't I maybe to think of that part, now?"

"If you do, you won't play out the game."

"No," said Helen sadly. "And I want to play out the game."

"She evidently wants it, too," said Cousin Anne. "Besides, do you call it playing fair when you don't play as hard as you can? What if you were to pretend a few little trumpery third-rate wishes are the big first choices she has asked for?"

"I wouldn't be telling the truth," said Helen honestly.

"You don't know what answer she will make. Remember it is a game, after all."

The girl's brow cleared. "It is a game. And she doesn't have to give me my wishes right out as I wish them. Maybe she'll turn them into a whole lovely new set of surprises, some kind of play answers like the things in the puzzle, everything exactly like a real big thing, only small. So you think it's all right for me to forget the part we're not going to speak of and wish just as hard as I can?"

"I think it is the only square thing for you to

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do. Meanwhile a person with such a responsibility on her shoulders needs dinner. You may serve mine here on the porch, Margaret."

Dinner! Dinner! How could anybody sit still long enough to eat dinner who had suddenly stepped into the shoes of Aladdin and whose brain kept conjuring up possibilities each more enchanting than the last? Twice a particularly gorgeous thought jumped Helen out of her chair and sent her skipping around the room to do a dance in the corner before it let her come back again to—chicken or baked boots, raspberry shortcake or sugared grass?—She really could not have told you what she was eating, as she sat there, her fork poised for long minutes of shining-eyed contemplation. It was a pity, for that dinner was one of Mrs. Higgins's best.

Seething with ideas, Helen scampered out into the sunshine and flying through the gardens, whisked over the wall and threw both arms around the big glossy leaved oak with the scar on its bark and the secret in its heart, the oak where she had mailed her letter. "Oh, Fairy Godmother!" she cried, "dear Fairy Godmother! I'm all of a boil inside. Feel me bubble."

Slipping down on the grass in the hiding-hole, she spread the letter on her knee.

" 'A hat for my head, or clothing for my heart'

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—how should I set to work to wish the last, I wonder? ‘Food for my body or bread for my brain’—that might be college or travel or books—how I’d like a whole roomful of books! Not one or two little measly cases or even shelves full of queer old theological things that you have in your house because your grandfather was a minister, but real live ready books with folks in them. They’d go all around the room, yards and yards of them, and clear up to the ceiling, with little traveling step-ladders that you’d run up to reach the top shelves the way men do in a shoe place. Oh!” shutting her eyes with a sigh of delight, “I can just feel myself running up one of those ladders. There’d be a fireplace and deep easy chairs and window-seats just built for an apple and a rainy day. And every single blessed thing I’ve got to do is to wish for it!”

Through the head tilted against the oak coursed many visitors. They came fairly treading on each other’s heels, small whimsies squeezing in between big dazzling schemes that awed Helen by their very sumptuousness. How could Crosspatch Thayer ever have thought of them? One minute she was saying, “Every Easter for five years I could go to Sunday-school in a new hat and suit the way the other girls do.” The next, through dreamily narrowed eyelids she was watching

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mother, Floyd, Phillis, herself, and the twins set foot on their very own ship that was to bear them around the world. Just then a meddlesome breeze flipped the fairy godmother's letter off her knee and whisked it across the grass and out on to the path that led away from the locked door.

"You must not wish for the moon." From the middle of the second page of the captured sheet the words challenged her attention.

"Having your own ship isn't having the moon," she argued stoutly. "Robert Louis Stevenson had his, and lots of people do now. Would wishing mother was well be wishing for the moon? What is the moon?" She pondered. "The moon—the moon—must be—something—something you couldn't possibly get by wishing—or working, either. If I wished for a kind of medicine I knew would be good for mother, that would be all right. But I couldn't ask the fairy godmother to make her well any more than I could wish for a lovely day to-morrow. Only God makes lovely days and well mothers. But I wish He would hurry with mine."

Back through the gardens frisked Helen, and on through a cedar hedge. Skirting a field where the waves of clover lay in long red swathes under the knife, she scrambled over a gray stone wall and came on the thorn tree where she thought she re-

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membered one. Knee-deep in grass as yet untouched by the mowers, it swept the ground with its southern branches and lifted those to the north quite far enough for a person to sit under them comfortably. A mid afternoon shadow ventured down the slope. It all might have been made on purpose to fit the fairy godmother's directions. And, yes, there was a flat stone three paces to the south.

"Apple thorn," cried Helen, "you are all ready now. But how out of all the things I want can I ever decide on three?"

Her brain stuffy with the tag ends of day dreams, her will paralyzed by its wealth of opportunity, she stared at the tree. Then she nodded. "Good-bye, thorn apple. I'll come again to-morrow. Now I feel as though I'd had a Thanksgiving dinner of ideas and I've got to go away and shake myself till they settle. Besides, I'm sure—almost—that there's a card up at the house I haven't read. Think of being so busy you haven't time to read all your own mail!"

There was a card. The handwriting was strange, cramped and round and painstaking, but more precise than the twins' and—— How funny! It was addressed "Red Top Castle."

Helen smiled as she read :

"Mister Dooley is wel, I thank you. He catches

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mice. A bad kitty chases him somtimes. Her name is Gold Drop. Ted says he wil come if you want him. I hope the oger is gon now.

“ELLEN BABBITT.”

“The little duck! I’ll go see Billy this minute. At least I’ll go see how he feels. For I’m so tangled up now I can’t make head or tail of what I want to wish.”

In the road beyond the wall, Wiggy prone on the grass behind him, Harold sobbed bitterly.

“Him gone,” he wailed into her comforting arms. “Him not wait for baby.”

“Who’s gone, sweetheart? I wouldn’t cry about it. Let’s go find Billy.”

“Him gone.”

“Billy?”

Harold nodded like a mandarin. “Billy gone —gone on car. Baby ——”

“But where, darling? Where did Billy go?”

A chubby finger pointed up the road.

Helen hugged him. “You old sweetheart! That isn’t the way to the station. I guess you made a mistake.”

“Choo choo car,” asserted Harold positively.

Into the girl’s memory flashed recollection that Cousin Anne had said trains sometimes stopped at Jones’ Crossing.

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“When did Billy go?” she implored. “Just now, Harold?”

More nods. He plunged into rapid talk.

She sprang to her feet and sped up the road, followed by renewed wails from the twice deserted Harold. Why she went or where she could not have clearly told, least of all what she would do when she got there. Fear laid its whip across her shoulders, whimpering incredulous nightmarish fear.

“He never, never would,” she told herself even while she ran.

Sarah Stuart, swinging between two pails of berries, nodded as they met. “He’s just ahead. Passed me only five minutes ago,” she called.

Panting, straining, with a sob in her throat and an ache in her side, Helen struggled on. Surely she could think of something to stop him.

At the top of the hill beyond the strawberry patch she halted. Below a train waited at Jones’ Crossing. Under her eyes a figure in a white cap swung aboard and with a puff of smoke the train crawled on through the valley.

He was gone! Billy was gone!

CHAPTER XVI

ORDER NO. 9123

"WHEN in doubt, ask." Over and over the words beat through Helen's brain. They said themselves in Mrs. Holbrook's pleasant, ripply voice and then they wandered into Molly's lovely lilting speech. They cajoled, commanded, teased, besought, argued, thundered.

"But the dryad only had to ask something about herself," returned Helen miserably, and straightway tried to forget the four persistent little words by wishing the most extravagant wishes she could think of. By rights such wishes ought to have rioted through her imagination in fancy tickling splendors; instead they looked like draggled rags and tasted like dust on her tongue.

"Oh, dear!" she sighed, "why, when you're having the loveliest time you ever had in your life does something have to come along and spoil it all? Even if I wished Billy back, it wouldn't be the same as if he had never run away, for not even the fairy godmother could bring him home to-night."

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"Couldn't she?" asked Cousin Anne.

Helen jumped. "Was I talking aloud? What did I say?"

"Nothing very intelligible. You scowled until I began to tremble in my crocheted shoes"—Helen put up two fingers to her forehead—"and you said, 'Not even the fairy godmother could bring him home to-night.' Were you pining for Jo, my dear? His sister's wedding is likely to absorb him till the sleeper leaves the Junction at eleven o'clock. No, I don't think he can possibly get here before midnight."

"Cousin Anne, if you had promised a person that you wouldn't tell something when you didn't want to promise at all, only the person made you, and then the person went and did it after all, and you knew it and thought you ought to tell, only you didn't want to do that either, what could you do?"

"Unless it was very important, I'd drop it," said Cousin Anne.

"But if it was—oh, desperately important?"

Cousin Anne smiled whimsically. "I would imagine that I was lost in a house with a hundred rooms and not a single window. I hadn't so much as a cracker in my pocket, and the pantries were all locked, and there was a storm coming up. I would think, as I groped from room to room,

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feeling a way in the pitch blackness, whom of all the people I knew I would rather see sitting over a fire eating bread and jam when I turned the next door-knob. Then I would go to that person and put my case frankly and ask advice."

"But if the person you'd ratherest see couldn't see you?"

"Then I would try the next best, always provided I really would care to see her if I were in the predicament mentioned. If the fire and the bread and jam would serve quite as well without her company—his preferred, if you like—I'd worry along by myself."

"Thank you, Cousin Anne." The girl slipped out of her chair. "I think, if you don't mind, I'll go over to the Holbrooks' for a minute."

Through glimmering lanes of ghostly flowers, sweet odors flocking thickly out of the dusk, Helen fled toward the wall. She must go fast before her courage failed, but oh, how could a night be so lovely when you had to do a thing like this? A light burned in the kitchen at "Gray Shingles." As she went up the path, the air, heavy with a rich chocolate smell, betokened fudge. Molly was singing while she scrubbed her pans. Pausing outside on the grass, her heart a hot lump in her throat, Helen watched her. She thought she had never realized till then quite how capable and

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sensible and utterly trustable Molly looked. Then she opened the screen door.

"Where have you been all the afternoon?" called Molly, turning at her step. "Why, child, what's the matter!"

All the ways Helen had thought of beginning flew out of her head. Words issued from her mouth. She heard them curiously, as though another girl were talking; she herself seemed to have no command over these stumbling, stammering, choking sentences.

"Harold told me—and I—I saw him. He took the train at Jones' Crossing. But I promised—— Only maybe I didn't promise not to tell after he'd gone. Anyway I can't keep it all night. I can't! I can't! You'll know what to do—— Oh, Molly, won't he ever ever come back?"

"Who come back? Why, Helen, don't cry! Tell me all about it."

"Billy," sobbed Helen. "And I won't cry. I didn't mean to. Only I can't bear you should feel badly—and your mother and all. Maybe if I'd told before—— But I promised, you know, and ——"

"Billy!"

The next minute Helen felt herself drawn out of the kitchen into the cool still dusk. Molly's arms were around her, Molly's voice spoke quietly in



“ WHY, CHILD, WHAT’S THE MATTER ? ”

her ear. On the low stone step with the soothing fingers of night on her face and Molly's arm over her shoulders, the whole story came out, gaspingly, with halts for sobs, but clearly and intelligibly.

When she had done, Molly spoke one sentence, low and emphatic. "Billy," she said, "ought to be spanked."

She did not wring her hands nor cry nor bewail the distress of her father and mother, or do any of the things Helen had expected. She only repeated thoughtfully and quite firmly, "Billy ought to be spanked."

"Yes," Helen agreed, "but—but what good would that do—now?"

Molly's arm tightened around her shoulders. "Billy loves to tease," she said.

A door opened in the kitchen behind them and the older girl drew the younger swiftly out of the circle of light.

"Where are you, my girl?" called Mr. Holbrook's voice. "That you, Helen? Good! Come and have fudge. It's melting like snow on the front porch."

"Pretty soon, father," shielding Helen's tear-wet face. "We're going to walk down the road a bit now."

"You mean," Helen whispered as they slipped

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out of the gate, "you mean—Billy—hasn't—run away?"

"I mean he had an errand at the Junction which he refused to put off till to-morrow. He is going to drive home with Jo. Incidentally I think he had designs on Jo's sister's wedding cake. That ticket—naughty boy!—was bought for mother to use. But though Billy is capable of trying to make you think he was going, I don't believe he would deliberately set to work to convince you he had gone."

Silently Helen reviewed the afternoon. "I did that," she acknowledged. "I added two and two and made them five."

"The easiest thing in the world to do outside an arithmetic," commented Molly. "Don't regret having told me. You did just right. I really don't think Billy is plotting anything desperate. Though he is stubborn, he is fairly reasonable too, and he gives in long before he lets anybody know it. You can't drive him a step, but he will go miles with you if you handle him right."

Helen sighed. "I was a goose, a stupid little goose."

Molly kissed her. "Nice little goose! The very nicest little goose I know."

Softer than any rose petal, that kiss lay on Helen's cheek all the way home. On account of it

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a large patch of skin remained unwashed that night. Thereby she was enabled to preserve the spot still warm and sweet when she climbed into bed and lay down carefully on the other cheek, inviting dreams. They came. That is, one came after Helen had turned over impartially half a dozen times in her sleep until she must have rubbed the kiss quite off. In the dream she wished for a pink china dog, and when she got it the dog opened its mouth like Balaam's ass and barked that Billy never came home.

But he did, though Molly, whose heart must have been less confident than her words, sat up till long after midnight watching for him. Helen had barely stuck her nose out-of-doors the next morning when she saw him bounding up the path.

"Moll thinks I ought to be whacked," he said. "But I say, Seesaw, what a swallow you've got! Just like a girl to scare herself blue and then forget all her promises!"

"You hadn't any business to make me promise, Billy Holbrook!"

"Just because a fellow has the toothache," grumbled Billy, "and trots off where he can get the old thing fixed is a poor reason for ——"

"Did you go to the Junction to have a tooth pulled, Billy Holbrook?"

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“Sure. It had been aching like the dickens all day and I ——”

There was a whirl of skirts, and Billy stood open-mouthed on an empty porch.

“I won’t imagine one single other thing,” Helen told herself some hours later. “Here I’ve been and maligned Billy, and it was just my imagination. I’m a penny-poor girl and I’ve booked a lot of dollar-rich wishes that it would take a fortune bigger than Aladdin’s most likely to carry out, and that’s all my imagination, too. The fairy said which three of the things I was hoping for in the next five years did I want most? She didn’t say I’d have to die without getting any but those three, and she didn’t say to choose the gorgeousest things I could think of or to choose for some other girl. I’ve got to climb a pyramid some time, but I’d just as soon think about it a while longer. And I don’t absolutely have to own in five years all the books I’m ever going to possess. Besides I never, never, never could decide among all the ideas I’ve had. Each one seems so much beautifuller than the last, and then another comes along and that’s lovelier yet, and I don’t know whether it really is lovelier or whether it’s just that it’s the last. Now I see why people in stories make such stupid wishes. They think and think and the longer they think the more woolly their brains feel, the

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way mine does now, and pretty soon their heads begin to spin like a merry-go-round and they get dizzy and clutch at anything, and most likely it's a wish they wish afterward they hadn't wished. You've either got to wish right off before you think, or else you've got to wait till you've stopped thinking. So I'm just going back to the things I was sure I wanted before the fairy godmother's letter came. Maybe I'm wasting wishes, but I don't dare choose among those splendiferous schemes; they're too new."

When Helen was a size or two smaller than the twins, she had spent many hours practicing somersaults in order that she might turn them as beautifully as Floyd. You ended by scrambling to your feet, she remembered, while the blood ran down into your toes with exactly this dizzily unfamiliar sense of familiarity. You were right side up again but you were not as yet quite at home that way. What was it she had told the genius of the house in the grim, black wood when he had said, "Choose," that first week at "Red Top"? Oh, but those wishes didn't fit at all now! Still, recollecting her answers might help to steady her whirling head.

But if you think that, outside of a story you make up about yourself and which you don't expect will come true, even when you have narrowed your range as Helen had narrowed hers, it is an al-

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together easy matter to decide on the three things you most wish to have happen in the next five years, try imagining you are lying on your back on a gentle hillslope with a single white cloud dawdling across the sky above you. Would you have dared to say, "Before that cloud is out of sight I shall make my choices"?

If the cloud had been less lazy I am not sure that Helen could have done it. The difficulty was not in naming one wish; it lay in finding three that would match and keep their color.

"Some things you think you want fade while you're trying to fancy how they'll look at the end of five years," she reflected shrewdly.

Sorting, throwing out, putting back again—three is so few when it seems as though you must have five, or at least four—she narrowed the list. And then all at once an idea struck her. You will readily see that she had been moving in its direction more or less for some time, otherwise she would probably never have thought of it. Ideas do not have actually to be new to seem so. This idea made the problem very much broader. It was simply a discovery that the fairy godmother had left out of her letter two words which she might have put in. She had not said what you want to happen to you, but just happen, a wholly different proposition.

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Now it is quite possible without being a prig or a goody-goody kind of person, of which obviously Helen was neither, to take a lively interest in more than your own affairs. Helen could not remember the time when she had not looked forward to Floyd's going to college. And had not Phil made her the most radiantly attired paper dolls that twelve-year-old ever had, dolls with hats and gowns of the latest mode that went on and came off and were kept in beautiful hand-painted trunks of no more thickness than two sheets of water color paper? And Phil wanted to study art. No, plainly this was a family problem. For when you belong to a family, Helen reflected, a real family like the Thayers, you want the things the others want almost as much as they want them themselves.

"What a pig you've been!" she admonished a grasshopper walking up a nodding grasshead. "As if you'd have the face to go to college yourself if Floyd and Phil hadn't had their turns first!"

Then she turned over, dug her elbows into the clover, seized her head in her hands, and thought.

The cloud balancing on the blue tip of a hill saw the beginning of the incantation —

"Book of reed and book of horn
Apple seed and apple thorn —"

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Deliberately the rite proceeded. On pink paper bought at Mr. Frink's store, assisted by Cousin Anne's most self-contained fountain pen, Helen wrote in letters that wobbled a little in spite of herself:

"I wish:—

" I. To have Floyd go to college.

" II. Art school for Phillis.

" III. A chance for me to earn money.

" N. B. I mean now before I am grown up, and in considerable sums.

" HELEN THAYER."

Hesitating a minute, she added another line.

" P. S. You will know when these wishes ought to come true."

After that she sealed and addressed the envelope and, prying up the flat stone, slid the letter underneath.

" Ugh! it's all earwiggy!

" Maybe the fairy godmother likes earwigs—Molly would," she added as she climbed the gray stone wall without once looking back. "I wish I could have thought of some big thing for mother, but I've half a notion she would almost as soon have these. Last spring she said if Floyd could only go to father's college she'd never worry again about how we were coming out. I didn't know

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before that she ever worried a bit. Oh, dear! I ought to have put in the name of the college. Well, it's done now and I can't get the letter back. But I guess the fairy godmother won't make any mistake."

At the hedge she found Billy investigating a hole in the ground and prepared to open peace overtures with a couple of lollipops.

"What made you run so fast this morning?" he demanded, when the overtures were well under way, removing the lollipop for purposes of conversation. "One minute you're a perfect lady, steady as a clock. The next—Z-z-z-p-ping!" Billy illustrated graphically.

Helen removed her lollipop also. "If I'd stayed," she said concisely, "I'd have boxed your ears. Where would the perfect lady have been then?"

Billy ducked. "Gone!" mimicking Harold. "All gone. Just the same, Seesaw, if you ever want to have any fun running away, don't get your confiding parent to hand you a ticket of leave. That was where I made my mistake."

"What do you mean, Billy?"

"Dad was so ready to help me off, I didn't see much use in going."

"Then you told him?"

"Told him? Isn't it etiquette to prime your

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family when you're expecting to be out nights? Says I, 'Father, I can't quite see things your way, etc., etc., etc.' Says he, 'Thinking of leaving us, son?' 'Something of the sort, sir,' says I. 'It costs money to travel, Billy,' says he. 'How much are you worth?' 'Not so much just now as I'm expecting to be later,' says I. 'We'll be sorry to lose you,' says dad, plus a few more items not for publication. 'But when your conscientious scruples get the better of you, come to me and I'll start you out with a nest-egg in your pocket.' I tell you, Seesaw, it somehow took the taste out of my mouth—and me as perky as a cricket half an hour before. Dad's a scorcher, all right."

Helen sucked in silence. "What about your place?" she asked at last. "That position where a fellow could keep himself going and a little more."

"What position? Say, Miss Over-the-Wall, it would pay you once in a while to hear exactly what's said to you."

She reddened. "Now I suppose you think you're going to get out of ever having told me you had a position at all."

"I certainly am."

"How?"

"Because I never did tell you."

"O-o-o-oh!"

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“Pop-eyes!”

Helen sat up very straight. “Billy Holbrook, do you mean to claim now that day before yesterday you never said anything about any place at all?”

“Sure, I told you about a job. Didn’t say whose it was, did I? As a matter of fact, it was Foley’s. He’s been holding it down for three weeks now. Likes it first-rate, Foley does.”

Absorbed in his teasing, Billy was unprepared for his companion’s headlong plunge across the lawn. What was the matter with her now? Then he saw the postman’s gray uniform jogging up the drive, and he took a couple of kangaroo leaps and caught up with her.

“That was a little too bad of me, day before yesterday, Seesaw, I’ll admit. Never dreamed you’d believe it. Hang it all, maybe I did too. You’re not expecting a letter, are you?”

“No,” said Helen. “I’m not honestly. Only you never can tell, you know.”

But of course there couldn’t be an answer as soon as this, she assured herself, even if Cousin Anne were in the secret. Only it seemed a pity to leave that pretty pink envelope long in company with the earwigs, and she had such a startling way of forestalling your expectations, had the fairy god-mother. The girl’s hands closed eagerly over the

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budget of mail. Three letters, five circulars, and a slim brown package for Cousin Anne; two post-cards for Mrs. Higgins; and one letter, rather fat and mussy, for Miss Helen Thayer. There was no mistaking the twins' responsibility for the address, done turn and turn about, each twin taking every other line. "Dere Nel," ran the square cut salutation. "We hav deecidid to rite you a leter," proceeded the round scrawly first sentence, wandering successfully in and out of a very black blot. For the inside was, like the outside of the letter, a coöperative venture, very jaunty indeed as to spelling, that line not being the twins' strongest, but packed full of news. Topsy Cottontail had encountered the Pages' "Major" and come off so victorious that "Major" did not dare to show his pointer nose on the Thayer side of his own yard; the Drakes had sent in raspberry ice yesterday, and mother had sat up two hours; and they wished Nell would come home soon and tell them stories. "Afekshunettly, Ted and Tess."

"Bless their old hearts!" cried Helen, a sudden spasm of homesickness clutching her under the arm. "How I'd like to hug them this minute!"

"There's something doing where they're 'round, I'll bet," Billy commented. "But say, that wasn't the letter you were looking for."

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"How'd you know?"

"I'm not blind in both eyes. F. G. up to her tricks again?"

"I don't think it's polite for you to talk like that about her."

"Talk like what? Can't she stand a little r. l.? R. l. is short for restful language. We all use it in summer—eases our mouths."

"What do you do the rest of the year?"

"Talk on stilts."

"I'd like to hear you."

"But you can't—not unless you catch me after September the fifteenth. Is it another picnic?"

"Is what another picnic?"

"The F. G.'s new stunt. Don't be a snail."

"No, oh, no. But I don't exactly know what it's going to be. That's why I'm perfectly crazy to find out."

"Keep your hair on," admonished Billy. "No lunatics in mine, please."

It was hard work. The postman's sorrel nag meandered up the drive three times before he brought anything to relieve Helen's curiosity. The minute her eyes sighted the pale pink envelope, however, she knew it had come, though the handwriting, slim and fragile and backward slanting, was utterly unlike the fairy godmother's. Tersely businesslike, the words stood out oddly against the

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dim tracery of flowers and buds that covered the paper.

“ *Wish Exchange*

“ *Fairyland,*

“ *Department of Godmothers.*

July 9, 19—

“ Thanks for your order of the 8th inst., which will have our careful attention as soon as it can be reached.

“ Should you find it necessary to refer to this order, in writing, please mention No. 9123.

“ Yours very truly,

“ WISH EXCHANGE.”

“ Oh, dear !” gasped Helen. “ It sounds—why, it sounds as if they might take all summer !”

CHAPTER XVII

WHAT DOES IT MEAN ?

LUCKILY the Wish Exchange did not take all summer to reach Order No. 9123. There might have been very little left of Helen, if it had. Instead, three days after the first, another of those pink envelopes stuck a blushing corner out of the bunch of commonplace white and gray rectangles directed to Cousin Anne. This was a longer envelope than the other, and therefore much more portentous looking. Helen forced herself to slit the end neatly with a hair ornament from Enoshima that Cousin Anne had given her, a fat little fish tipping a slim ivory stick. Cousin Anne had recommended the fish for such uses, and as he was very new to her Helen thought this a thrilling moment to christen him. But it is undeniable that the fish was slow.

Two long slips of yellow paper and a third of blue fluttered to the floor as she drew out the few formal words, beginning "Dear Madam : Enclosed please find," and ending as before, "Very truly yours, Wish Exchange." A glance sufficed to

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show that the point was not here. She bent for the yellow slips.

With her tongue tucked away like a lumpy caramel in her cheek Helen studied the first, her eyes growing bigger and more jubilant every second. It was a sight draft drawn on the Third National Bank of Fairyland for an art course made payable to Phillis Townsend Thayer, signed and countersigned in half a dozen places by the most piquant and fascinating names—Robin Goodfellow, Tickle Feathertop, John Quille Greenslip, Flutter Flittermouse, and the like. Helen laughed aloud as she read some of them. But Robin Goodfellow reassured her. He seemed to be the president, and she knew him already by reputation.

If you think this information was absorbed all at once it is plain you have never received any such drafts. After the first reading Helen could not to save her life have told you that Tickle Feathertop's name was signed above the tiny word treasurer in the lower left-hand corner. It took five readings and frequent references to the second yellow slip to put her in possession of the facts, but then she could have taken an examination on those checks and passed perfectly with her eyes shut.

The second slip read exactly like the first except that it said, "Pay to the order of Floyd

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Thayer—one college education,” and pricked in red dots in two places were the words, “Not more than five.” That made Helen laugh again.

“I guess Floyd won’t want more than five college educations,” she said aloud. “But how under the sun shall I cash them?”

“It looks to me as though Floyd and Phillis will have to do that,” returned Cousin Anne. “Are there no directions in the letter?”

“Not a word. It doesn’t say anything really except politenesses.”

“That seems rather queer,” mused Cousin Anne.

“Perhaps I’ll get a letter from the fairy god-mother telling me what to do,” Helen suggested. “Yes, that must be it. Cousin Anne, I feel exactly the way a boy at home did who went to Washington last spring and in the treasury they let him hold forty million dollars in his two hands—paper money, you know. He told Phil it might as well have been so much scratch paper for all the difference he noticed. Here I’ve got Floyd’s college and Phil’s art course right in my ten fingers,” brandishing the checks, “and I can’t feel ’em a bit. I suppose I’ll just have to wait till I see Floyd packing his trunk. Then maybe it will seem real.”

“Are you intending to write him?”

“Write Floyd? No, indeed! He’d only laugh

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and tell me to run along with my string of little fishes, and use the check, maybe, to light the kitchen fire with."

"Rather a costly squib."

"Yes, wouldn't it be? Oh, Cousin Anne, you do play so beautifully! You don't say I'm silly and gullible and—and—— But everything she has done so far has had something real about it. The fairy godmother hasn't slipped up on a single thing. You don't think she would begin now, do you?"

"I can't advise you on that point, my dear. You will have to use your own faith and run your own risks, or——" Cousin Anne paused expressively. "As you say, she has proved trustworthy enough so far."

"She's a darling!" cried Helen, "a perfect darling. Only these are such big things, and I don't see—— But there! I'm not going to try to see. When I use my mind and stand outside myself and look at myself, Cousin Anne, I feel like a perfect idiot to think for the teeniest second they could possibly come true. But I'm going to play I think so, just for fun. Something lovely will happen, anyway. I don't care if I am an idiot. I shall believe in my fairy godmother!"

With this declaration Helen reached for the blue slip. It bore the Roman numeral III in the upper

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left-hand corner and otherwise was blank save for two names written in the slight backhand of the Wish Exchange's amanuensis.

"Frederick and Emilie Parsons," read Helen slowly. "I never even heard of them."

"Freddy Parsons and little Em!" Cousin Anne exclaimed. "What does she want you to do about them?"

Helen handed over the slim blue slip. "There's not a word of explanation. Do you suppose it's another puzzle? And who are Freddy Parsons and little Em?"

Cousin Anne studied the slip. "Philosophers have observed that queer things happen in this world, my dear. As when in Shanghai you run into a friend whom you thought dairy-farming in New Hampshire—actually the most likely meeting in the world when you come to investigate it. Fred and Emilie Parsons? They are two little friends of mine. Emilie is, I think, about the age of your twins, Freddy a year younger. Their mother is dead and their father builds railroads in South America. They live in a big prim old-fashioned house with a small prim no-fashioned aunt, who tries to understand them but is not built on their lines. Lately I believe she has given up trying. Perhaps she thinks they are not worth while. But they are, for they are the quaintest,

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most fanciful, forlornest, lonesomest little pair it has ever given me a heartache to see—children without a playfellow in the world except each other, and closets full of expensive toys and a queer kind of creature they have made up for themselves and christened, ‘The Tortail’—tell me why, if you can. ‘The Tortail’ lives in the grove behind the house, and from an excursion there Freddy and Em come home half scared out of their small wits.

“I call her ‘little Em’ because, though older than Freddy, she is half a head shorter, a frail tiny creature, the sight of whom makes you want to pick her up and run away into the middle of a big buttercup meadow and there sit down and hug her, but acquaintance with whom proves that you never could do it without her consent. I have a great respect for little Em, but I abominate ‘The Tortail.’ So does Freddy, though it fascinates him. He is always teasing Em to tell him stories about it, after which he shivers half the night through, fearful lest it should crawl in the window. ‘The Tortail’ bullies him and he bullies little Em and both children are likely to die of lonesomeness and the horrors for lack of something cheerful to take up their minds. Die is rather a strong word perhaps, but you can see for yourself what they need.”

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"They ought to know their fairy godmother," suggested Helen.

"The very thing! I wish they might fill their imaginations with a fairy godmother instead of that miserable Tortail. Their mother was a friend of mine, of Mrs. James and your mother too, a woman I dearly loved. So naturally I am interested in her chicks. You will find their pictures in the top drawer of that desk."

Two small bored faces looked up from the cardboard, the boy a little sulky, the girl a trifle haughty.

"They look exactly," Helen declared, "as the twins did when mother insisted on taking them to the photographer's on their last birthday. The poor dears were so cross! I had to tell them stories a whole hour that night to make them half-way happy enough to go to sleep."

"I am afraid there was nobody to tell Freddy and Em stories," said Cousin Anne. "Perhaps they made them up, turn and turn about. The last time I visited at their house Freddy told me a marvelous tale of a grasshopper as big as a barn, who jumped a small hill at one hop. Yes, I certainly think those children ought to know their fairy godmother."

"I like them." Helen still surveyed the photograph. "I think I like them a lot. You might

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advise them to look for their fairy spectacles, Cousin Anne, only the funny thing about those is that a person never seems to know there are any spectacles till her fairy godmother says they are perched on her nose. I haven't the least idea about mine except what she has told me, and that's precious little. Is Emilie as stubborn as she looks?"

Cousin Anne laughed. "That expression came from her not fancying the photographer. She told me privately that he resembled a horse and she preferred four-legged horses to two-legged. Emilie can be a small donkey when she chooses. For instance, she took a fancy to sign herself 'M. Parsons,'—the letter, you know—when she first learned to print her name, and nothing induces her to change."

"Cute youngster! But what can the fairy godmother—I mean the Wish Exchange have meant by putting those names on this blue slip marked 'III'? I want to earn money, and they name me two children! Perhaps they mixed the papers in sending out several at once."

"It might happen. Still, as your confidential adviser, since the fairy godmother seems to have given us a tip, I don't dare counsel you to ignore it. Suppose you let me inquire into the matter."

So Helen danced away to thank the fairy god-

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mother on a sheet of her prettiest paper. But though she set the words down hot right out of her heart, when she came to read them over they sounded cold and queer and not at all the way she had meant them. A second attempt and a third failed to better the matter. The fourth she prudently sealed without reading, reflecting that a person who knew so much about spectacles ought to be able to read between the lines. "For that's where most of my letter is," she soliloquized as she posted it in the oak tree. "I couldn't seem to get it into the words."

Next came the important question of what to do with the checks. She might ask Cousin Anne to put them in the safe, but could she forego the pleasure of looking at them at least three times a day? Besides, it was almost as necessary to keep watch of these yellow slips as it had been of the fairy godmother's first letter; if she did not see them often she might forget they were real. By day they could travel pinned inside her dress, though their crisp freshness would be better preserved under the handkerchiefs in the top drawer of her dressing table. And since that was the place where you always read of people hiding things, perhaps nobody would think of actually looking in such a commonplace spot. Margaret was honest, she was sure. But what should she

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do if a robber appeared in the middle of the night and demanded her most valued possessions?

"Have you discovered anything yet, Confidential Adviser?" or, "I suppose there's no news about Freddy and Emilie Parsons," she would remark importantly at least a quarter as often as she wanted to. The other three-quarters of the time the question died heroically on the tip of her tongue. Cousin Anne might find it monotonous. And the Confidential Adviser would reply, "Not yet. But I think I have a clue upon which I can report before long." Somewhere in the vicinity of the fourteenth inquiry a twinkle made its appearance deep in the keen eyes, and thereafter associated persistently with the gravity and importance.

The absence of a letter from the fairy godmother was certainly queer. Not that the interval since her last was unwontedly long as yet, but Helen had expected a letter close on the heels of the checks, and it is always odd when what you expect fails to happen. Did not the fairy godmother approve her choices? Or was it her habit after launching them to leave business ventures entirely in the hands of the Wish Exchange? When you come to think of it the possible explanations were bewilderingly many. Helen spent half an afternoon, when she might have been playing tennis

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with Billy, hidden away in the nook under the wall considering the problem, and at the end of her thinking she was quite as far from understanding the fairy godmother's silence as at first.

"Which she probably doesn't expect you to, silly!" she told herself at last, picking up her racket. "Fairy godmothers aren't made to be understood. They wouldn't be half so much fun if you could see right through them like a pane of glass. I wonder whether Billy still wants to play tennis."

Billy, as inquiry proved, had gone to the village. In his stead Mr. Holbrook gayly offered his services and kept Helen jumping on her side of the net. Thus it happened that she was not on the porch to intercept the afternoon postman, and a letter had to follow her over the wall and down the road to the neglected court which Billy had found and put in condition for summer play. It was not *the* letter at all. It bore the words "Special Delivery," underscored twice, written below a blazing line of two cent stamps. That was why it had not been allowed to lie quietly on the hall table at "Red Top" after the postman was through with it.

At a glance Helen saw the letter was from Phillis. The sight of its emphatic red stamps frightened her almost into paralysis, but the read-

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ing sent her scurrying up the road toward "Red Top" as fast as two hasty legs could scamper.

Phillis wrote that the doctor had ordered mother to the shore for a month or six weeks of ocean air. Phillis was to accompany her as companion, entertainer, and nurse, though the doctor did not lay much stress on the nursing part now. Meanwhile somebody must keep house for Floyd and the twins. Floyd might board, but it would cost almost as much as he was earning at his delivery job for Grant and Myers, and mother refused to have the twins quartered on the neighbors. Cousin Anne seemed so much better, perhaps she could spare Helen soon. And she had written in such praise of Helen's record at "Red Top" that mother had been delighted and had herself proposed the plan they wanted Helen to consider now. Could she come home and take care of Floyd and the twins while mother and Phillis were absent?

Just here, on her second round of the closely covered pages, the girl reached Cousin Anne's chair on the porch, and with a little squeal dropped down beside her and began reading the letter aloud.

"'Bridget will come over mornings to help you as she does me'—Bridget's our old girl, the one we had before father died; she dotes on mother"—Helen interpolated. "'And perhaps we can get her to stay nights. She will if little

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Pat behaves himself. He stole a ride in somebody's machine last week when it tried to climb a telegraph pole while the chauffeur caught forty winks. He was dead tired, poor man! Had only slept six hours for two nights, they say, and the road was so smooth and straight he lost himself in broad daylight. Pat is almost as good as new now. But I can see the idea of what he may do next worries mother, so I talk as though I thought this accident would surely keep him out of mischief for a while.

“ ‘Mrs. Page and Mrs. Loomis will look in often, of course. And it isn't as though Floyd couldn't be depended on. He is the nicest boy to help around the house. Mother says she thinks perhaps her illness was sent to show her what capable children she has. Even if Bridget can't come she declares she will feel perfectly safe for you with Floyd in the house, and neighbors on both sides. Burglars know enough not to patronize us by this time.

“ ‘I remember how eager you were to take my place here last month, so I am not afraid but that you will want to come, and I am sure you will get along finely.’—Oho!” thought Helen. “That's not the way you talked last month, Phil. Maybe you're trying on me the methods you use with mother about Mike.

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“ ‘But to get to the question again. We have a chance to secure rooms at Gloucester that friends of the Pages have to give up. I don’t know when we can get anything else desirable, it is so late. The rooms are engaged for a month beginning next Saturday and of course if we take them we pay for the whole time whether we are late or not. Now, can you come Thursday? It’s very soon, I know, but if you can we will have one day all together, and then mother and I will leave Saturday for Gloucester. The sooner the better, doctor says. He expects mother to gain fast by the sea.

“ ‘Find out as quick as you can, please, what Cousin Anne is willing to let you do. I’m sure she will understand this emergency. But go gently, Helen. Try not to take her head off if she doesn’t tell you to catch the next train. Telegraph me when you will come. You see we must know whether we can depend on you and for how soon. And ——’

“ ‘Oh, dear!’” Helen pulled herself up short. “ ‘I ought not to have read you that last paragraph. Phillis wouldn’t have. But I never think in time.’”

“ ‘My head is still safe on my own shoulders,’ said Cousin Anne. “ ‘Certainly you must go Thursday. Day after to-morrow. That is rather soon. I am perfectly well, child, a trifle lazy after my

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siege with the ogre, but it will pass. I had thought of trying to give you a good time for a bit now. You will have to come again for that."

"Why, Cousin Anne, I've had a good time! I've had the bestest time that ever was. Don't I look it?"

Cousin Anne patted the warm brown cheek. "You look like a dear," she said, "which is what you are, and 'Red Top' will miss you."

"Not more than I shall miss 'Red Top.'"

But all the while inside her a little voice was singing jubilantly. She was going home, home to mother and Floyd and Phil and the twins, only mother and Phil wouldn't be there long after she arrived home! Her throat pricked the way it pricked sometimes when she looked at Molly. "Red Top" was lovely, "Red Top" was enchanted, but—home! Was there any place in the whole big world like the dear familiar shabby house under the elms? And she, Crosspatch Thayer, was going to run it all herself! With Bridget to help, but help only. Her chest swelled with responsibility.

Not until, standing before her dressing table that night thrusting handkerchiefs into a crumpled silk case, a corner of yellow paper met her eyes did she remember the fairy godmother. This fact, when you think it through thoroughly, is proof of the

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full glory of Phillis's proposal. But now, teasing and sharp and totally unlooked for, appeared thorns under the rose. How was she to find out the meaning of "III—Frederick and Emilie Parsons," when she went home? Would the fairy godmother write to her anywhere but at "Red Top"? That Cousin Anne must write was plain; wasn't she her confidential adviser? But there again was the tangle in Billy's affairs. And of that Cousin Anne could not tell her. Never to know whether or not he settled with Ted Babbitt! It was maddening. Did people always have to go away and leave loose ends behind them, threads that they wanted to see tied themselves? It was as though you shut a book at the most exciting place and never saw it again, but had to guess at the end or have somebody tell it to you, a woefully disappointing makeshift.

Helen was almost asleep when suddenly she sat bolt upright in the dark and addressed the morning-glories. "The door in the wall!" she gasped. "And the tree with the box in it! I can't go away without knowing about them!"

CHAPTER XVIII

THE GODMOTHER UNMASKED

ALL the windows of "Red Top" stood open to the freshness of sun and breeze. These two were having a game of tag with each other, skipping through fluttering curtains, dodging in and out among twinkling leaves, chasing around tree trunks and across the grass. The lawn was littered with cobwebs, looking, Helen thought, as though fairies had forgotten their handkerchiefs after a revel.

The morning seemed to think it had plenty of time to play, but she was very busy. It was her last day at "Red Top" and there were buttons to be sewed on and stockings to be darned and small breaks to be mended here and there, in order to prove to Phillis that she could take a stitch in time when she tried. Margaret had the night before carried off an armful of soiled skirts and dresses, for Cousin Anne insisted on sending her home as clean as she came. Being methodical in theory, however helter-skelter in practice, she had to look over her new possessions and make a beginning at least of stowing in boxes all the pudgy, angular, awkward squad of things that never fit in

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be much better for you not to see me, you know. Then you can always wonder and dream and dress me in the gayest tissues of your fancy—paint me little or big, with green hair or gold, blue eyes or beryl. Unseen, I am a dream, a rainbow, laughter on the mind, forget-me-nots by the brook, bird notes from the wood. Seen, I shrivel to the compass of a head, two hands, two feet. Who would exchange the unknown for the known, the infinite for the definite, fancy for fact? Be careful how you shatter a bubble; its iridescent sphere mimics a world.

“Truly I am earnest in my warning. Besides, didn’t I tell you that already you know me better than the folk who only see me? You want to do both? Well, there is reason in that, I confess—reason, but not as surely sense. Sense, little girl, is careful of its mysteries. And you may not like secrets unveiled. If you don’t, blame yourself—not me. Fairy godmothers are not made to be gazed at. You can have only one me after that—my own me—in place of a dozen guesses of your imagination. So choose carefully. This airy thistledown of ours will float beyond reach on a breath too sharply breathed.

“But if you wish to run the risks and insist—meet me in the lily garden when the clock strikes five.

“YOUR FAIRY GODMOTHER.”

“Let her alone,” advised Cousin Anne. “Probably she is some little monkey of a creature.”

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“ Oh, no ! ” cried Helen, “ she couldn’t be. But —but —— ”

The words died against her teeth. The explanation she had tried so hard to pretend she hadn’t thought of, began to jump dizzily up and down in her brain as though it were only the wildest imagining. Who was the fairy godmother ? How could she be coming here this afternoon ? Unless Cousin Anne expected her on a visit. That would explain why she was so ready to let Helen go ; she expected company. But it would not explain how the fairy godmother had been able to receive her goddaughter’s message and answer it in the same forenoon. Could she be already in the neighborhood, stopping at one of those pleasant houses in the village or at some farmhouse on a country road ? Why then hadn’t Cousin Anne spoken of her ?

Leaving all this out of consideration, how could Helen tell Cousin Anne that anything might take precedence of an appointment with the fairy godmother, whoever she might be ? It seemed to convict her of disloyalty. Yet Billy would expect her and never, never, she felt sure, open his mouth on the subject of Ted Babbitt were she not in place promptly. A glimmering notion that Billy had chosen to-day to go to Fairfield only because of the journey to-morrow forbade her to fail him. Could

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she manage both engagements? Ten minutes was a fairly long time, and by being a little late — But how impolite! Helen's spirit cringed at the notion of arriving late at such a meeting.

"I ought to wait for her, not let her wait even a second for me. She might think I didn't care to see her, and go away. But what can I do? I can't write and say, 'Please, Fairy Godmother, make it half-past five.' How that would sound! No, I'll just have to trust to luck to keep both."

There was nobody, large or small, in the lily garden when at a quarter before five Helen subjected it to careful inspection. Several long green worms discovered themselves to her, and one of these she carried on a leaf held at arm's length as far as the locked gate, intending him as a gift to Molly. There the worm dropped into a clump of blue larkspurs, so that Molly never made his acquaintance. With careful reference to a spider busily netting at a corner of the mysterious door, the girl mounted the step-ladder and dipped into the cool green cubby-hole.

Feet pounded up the road, and Billy brushed through the bushes and threw himself down on the grass, tossing his white cap on a bough. "Thought I'd be late," he said. "The train was. I say, Seesaw, punch me for a know-it-all, if you like."

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"You found Ted Babbitt, and it's all right now?" she breathed.

Billy rolled over and chose a grass blade discriminately. "I don't like the fellow, understand that. He's not my sort. But I must say I came nearer liking him than I ever thought I would."

"Oh, Billy, I'm so glad."

The boy cocked a mocking brown eye at her. "Ho! so that's what you think, is it? 'Oh, Billy, I'm so glad.' Got a picture of two fellows holding a love feast, I suppose, powwowing at a great rate about We, Us and Company, the firm that'll never bust partnership. Now you just listen to me and I'll retail as nearly as I can that little conversation. No partnership about it.

"I got over there pretty near noon and—— Gee-wollikins! If there wasn't the high and mighty Babs in the hay-field. What work he did wouldn't hurt him much, I guess, but never mind that. Hit number one. Says I, 'Babbitt, you know I don't take back a word I said some weeks ago, but I'll acknowledge now that I didn't choose a good place to air my sentiments. I'll even go so far as to say it wasn't exactly my business to knock you down.'

"'What you said was right enough, Holbrook,' Babs comes back at me. 'So was the knock-down.

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I subscribe to both of 'em.' Hit number two, a facer. Maybe he couldn't have bowled me over with a head o' timothy grass.

" 'Wrote Foley yesterday,' he goes on. Number three. I lost count after that. ' Couldn't say it. Tried before school closed, you know. Did, 'pon honor. Words wouldn't come.'—Babs talks that way, in jerks.—' Didn't know when I landed on Foley that he hadn't any chink. Found out afterward. Blamed sorry. Wanted to kick myself. No good. Couldn't talk. Mule, all right.' "

The clock struck five.

" ' Here's another,' says I. ' Hot day.'

" ' Beastly,' says he.

" ' Heard from any of the fellows? '

" He runs me over a list of 'em. ' You'll stop to dinner? '

" I stopped, saw little sister, uncle, aunt, cousins, and the rest of the push, including Mr. Dooley. Good looking cat. Little sister's all right, too."

" Her brother is mighty nice to her," Helen remarked.

" Glad to hear it. Hope he keeps it up. After dinner Babs says, ' I'd drive you home, Holbrook, but my car's in the shop for repairs. Side roads play the dickens with it.'

" ' Stick to the main highways,' I advise him.

THE GODMOTHER UNMASKED

'Polly lives somewhere round here, doesn't he? I must look in on Polly.' "

"Who's Polly?" interposed Helen.

"William Hackett Pollard, best hockey player and debater in school. So Polly and I kill time without half trying. Sprint for train, whistle toots—— Exit Billy."

He folded his arms, cocked his head on one side and looked up at her like a naughty brown cherub.

"Good boy! Nice little Bill!" she sparred gayly, but with an undercurrent of honest gladness in her voice, as she rose to her knees.

"What's your rush? Come on and play tennis."

"I've an engagement, Billy," she pleaded. "I'm late now, but ——"

"What about our last game?"

"I'll play to-night after supper."

"No go. Promised to beau Moll to a show in town. You're a nice pal, you are!"

"I'll get up early and play before breakfast, but I can't stop now. She'll be waiting, at least I hope she will."

"The F. G.? Oh, that's the game, is it? Run along, Seesaw. Hustle, or you'll lose her!"

Helen was tremendously afraid she had already lost her. The second best organdie quaked as it sped toward the lily garden. If the fairy god-

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mother should —— If she shouldn't —— Now that she stood on the threshold of the encounter the girl hardly knew whether she were more eager for it than afraid. Pit-pat, pit-pat, pit-pat, pounded a hammer in her chest all the while her feet hurried her toward the gate. Then she was in among the lilies, the hammer in her throat now—and there was only Cousin Anne, reading by the low stone table, with shining ranks of lilies tall and proud behind her. That was queer, when Cousin Anne knew —— The thought skipped the surface of Helen's mind and bounded off into space.

“Did you see her?” she cried. “Has she come?”

Cousin Anne looked up, a little smile ruffling the firm line of her lips. “I have seen no one, my dear, and I have been here since five o'clock.”

“But she promised!”

“Then perhaps she is here.” Cousin Anne continued to smile.

“She's not in sight anywhere. You don't suppose I've lost the fairy spectacles? Oh, if I have —— Why—why ——”

For a full minute Helen stared speechless at the face above the flowing white gown, at the keen twinkling eyes, at the quizzical curving lips.

“You! you!” she stammered. “Did you write me those letters?”



“IT WAS YOU ALL ALONG”

THE GODMOTHER UNMASKED

“‘I don’t want any explanation,’” quoted Cousin Anne, “‘I just want the fairy godmother.’ Do you remember saying that?”

But Helen had both arms around Cousin Anne’s neck now and was almost choking the breath out of her. “It was you all along—and I thought—I thought—— Never mind what I said. I’ve got the fairy godmother! And I like the explanation!” More hugs. “Oh, you darling! What ever, ever put it into your head?”

“I’m a scheming old woman, Nell. When I first saw you I knew you expected a ‘horrid time’ and I wished you to be disappointed. Besides, my dear, I loved you when I saw how you swallowed your blues that night to amuse my bedridden self.”

“What a dunce I’ve been!” said Helen, blushing happily at Cousin Anne’s praise. “Any girl but me would have known long ago. But I was so sure, so sure it was somebody it wasn’t.”

“So I saw.”

“And the locked gate?”

“When your mother and Mrs. James ——”

“She was the one I thought,” Helen breathed.

“When they and I were girls,” said Cousin Anne, “there was no door in the wall. It ran unbroken at the back of the flower gardens. We used to let ourselves out through the gate in the

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vegetable patch and walk down the road to the oak where you mailed your letters."

"To the hiding-hole?"

"To the hiding-hole. I thought you could make use of it. It is the pleasantest little green spot where a girl ever lay and dreamed, or three girls ever sat and told secrets. The bushes even when we were young grew tall enough to screen us from the road. We had a post-office in the oak and mail circulated briskly."

"I found that, too," said Helen. "I mean I found the hollow and the box in it. Cousin Anne, why does the outside of the letter say to wait till nineteen-thirty?"

"It was an idea of your mother's our last summer together. We were fifteen. 'Let's seal up in a metal box the things we like best,' she said, 'and write an account of all the good times we have had here and the things we have done, and leave them in the tree for some other girls to find fifty years from now.'"

"Fifty years!" cried Helen. "Then they've been there more than thirty?"

Cousin Anne nodded. "The scheme took our breath away at first as it does yours. It was dazzling. Your mother had big ideas, Nell. 'Just think how we would feel,' she said, 'if half a century ago some girls had left a record of their doings

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for us to find.' But we didn't need urging. We never did. We explained our scheme in a letter, signed it with our three names, and marked it not to be opened till nineteen-thirty. The box contains a kind of composite picture of our likes and our larks. I think your mother put in the doll two inches high that she dressed so elaborately the summer she was twelve. It had real hair and its eyes opened and shut. Tillie James was never seen to wear her coral beads after the box was closed. I know I contributed a wonderful Nuremberg top. I often wish I had it now to amuse children with, though I don't begrudge it to the child who shall find it. Who will she be, I wonder?"

"Oh, I wonder!" Helen's eyes were dreamy. The story of the three girls who had so dramatically put away their childhood had taken fast hold of her fancy.

"When nineteen-thirty comes," said Cousin Anne, "send me the names of the three nicest girls you know and I will ask them to 'Red Top' for a month. We will lock the door and make the green hiding-hole as secret as ever it used to be, as secret as you have found it this summer, and give them the chance to find the hidden treasures."

"Lucky girls!" Helen's voice was a trifle wistful. "I'd like to be one of them." Then her

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faced cleared. "Though it's nearly as nice to know a thing like that about the tree as it would be to find the things yourself in nineteen-thirty. Nineteen-thirty," she repeated softly. "It's almost as though I'd helped put them there myself."

"Are the letter and the box all right?" asked Cousin Anne. "I have never looked to see."

Helen shut her lips on Billy's perfidy. "They're rather rusty and mouldy."

"That is natural." Cousin Anne sat silent, her thoughts bridging the years.

"And the mark on the trunk?" queried Helen at last. "The circle with the triangle inside?"

"That was our symbol, and we cut it in the bark to be a sign as long as the tree should stand. A three-cornered friendship within the circle of eternity. We were very proud of that symbol."

It was Helen's turn to sit silent, twisting her fingers in Cousin Anne's. "It's lovely," she pronounced. "And it makes your throat sort of lumpy. I guess that's part of the loveliness. Then the door was locked just for me?"

"There was little enough I could do to amuse you," said Cousin Anne. "I couldn't have you eating your heart out with homesickness. Don't I know what it is like? Imagination is the best antidote to the dumps I have ever found. When I saw what fun you were getting out of the door—

THE GODMOTHER UNMASKED

I could read your eyes, my dear—I knew I might venture the first of the godmother letters.”

“Those darling letters!”

“It was a game in which your imagination was chief player, and it helped give me, too, a diverting summer. Don’t you suppose I liked playing the part of fairy godmother?”

“I don’t see how you did it,” Helen declared. “Everything came so pat! Take that lovely dress and the letter about my inside face. I—I was getting fearfully cross and they smoothed out all my knots.”

Cousin Anne chuckled. “Part of it we will call happenstance. Part was foresight—and insight, if you like. I shall not tell you how I had the letters copied. Jo mailed them for me on the trains. Have you never noticed the letter slit in the side of a mail car? They traveled to the Junction and came back. This morning I had to use the post-office in the village. Are you sure these revelations do not rub the bloom off the fairy godmother’s wings?”

“I don’t know,” said Helen honestly. “So far I can’t think of anything but the magic, for it was magic even if you were it. I surely had fun with that locked gate. And I love, I perfectly love to think about the things waiting in the tree. But I think I won’t tell Phillis. Only,” she

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hesitated, "how did you find out I hated the way I looked?"

"The girl I used to be did it. Do you hate it as much now?"

"Oh, dear, no! I can't bother. You see I've had such a perfectly gorgeous time when I forgot all about it. Cousin Anne, you are wonderfuller even than I thought you were. Those rules for the wishing game—how did you ever——" She jumped to her feet. Horror choked speech into broken sentences. "You—you were the fairy god-mother and I—— Oh! Oh! I asked—actually asked for—for Floyd and Phil—— What shall I do? What shall I do?"

"You will sit down," said the deep clear voice, "and listen to me. Don't you suppose I have always intended to do those two things you refer to? It seemed to me rather a good scheme when the chance offered to put them in the game. I have not been quite awake to the rapidity with which Floyd is growing up. I needed your visit, my dear. You tell me more in a day than Phillis does in a month, and I am sincerely grateful."

"I know I talk too much—Phil says so. But you're a dear to put the rest in."

"Then as your confidential adviser and not as a dear this time, I will give you a bit of information. A woman I know who is very fond of Fred

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and Emilie Parsons has authorized me to make you a proposition. She wants somebody to play with them the fairy godmother game, and I have recommended you. Her idea is to have the children hear from their godmother on an average of once a week. They have everything that money can buy, so they do not need gifts of any cash value. What they do need is some one to love them, laugh and play with them, pretend with them, understand them. I should not wonder if four or five years from now Emilie might need to hear about her inside face. Most people do, pretty or plain, some time or other. The plan is to have the letters continue, to Emilie at least, until she is fourteen—six years, you see.”

“Six years!” cried Helen.

“It will be a difficult task, I realize fully, to write weekly letters for six years to two children whom you have never seen. A year or two—but six! Harder work than raising mushrooms. You can do it, I think, for the twins will keep you in training at home and your mother is a mine of advice in tight places. There is a bird house in the garden where the Parsons children might mail letters to you. The gardener could forward them to your address. They must have a chance to write their godmother. Such questions as I foresee you will have to face! The point is,” smiling, “how

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deep a well is your fancy, child? A few feet, or five fathoms, or does the bottom lie beyond sounding? You need not try to solve the problem before deciding, only time can do that, but I do want you to think it over carefully. It is a chance to pass on the game, you see, but it means, as I say, hard work.

“The terms I am authorized to offer are fifty dollars the first year, plus your expenses in stamps, paper, and the like, seventy-five the second, and after that an increase of fifty dollars each year for as many years of the six as you can keep it up—always providing the letters prove satisfactory. You will have a month’s vacation.”

Helen calculated rapidly. “Surely, Cousin Anne, it’s too much to pay for—for fun, like those letters!”

“The more fun the better,” said Cousin Anne. “But forty-eight letters a year for six years—letters with the care and thought and imagination you will put into these, cost more than you think. Some of the six times forty-eight may not be easy to write. What of weeks when you are absorbed in other things, weeks when you scratch your fancy in vain for a new idea, weeks when you would give anything to be free of your bargain?”

“I wouldn’t grudge the twins a letter a week no matter how busy I was.”

THE GODMOTHER UNMASKED

"Could you play the same game with the twins for six years and keep them from tiring of it?"

"I don't know—perhaps not. But there are so many chances in this game. And when you figure it out, that money will keep on right through my college course, getting bigger and bigger. Of course it won't pay for everything, but with a scholarship—— Oh, I feel all fizzy inside like a bottle of soda water. Why should you be paid for doing something that you want to do? I am so crazy to write those letters I have to bite my tongue to keep from saying yes, now. When may I say yes, Cousin Anne?"

"Some day after the middle of next week—not before. Then you may say yes or no, and as your representative I will close or cancel the contract."

"She may not grow up an angel," thought Cousin Anne, watching the eager absorbed face, "but she will learn to be what is better, a patient, resourceful woman, godmothering Freddy and little Em."

"Do you truly think I can make my letters good enough?" the girl was asking.

"I truly do."

"It isn't as if I hadn't the best models in the world. It was lovely having a fairy godmother, but I do believe it's going to be lovelier being one. I can feel ideas sprouting in my head already."

That night after tea, armed with a ball of twine,

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Helen climbed again into the oak over the wall and set to rummaging in the hollow. Her letters to the fairy godmother had been laid lightly just behind the green leaf-curtain; the wonderful box lay much deeper. A little sigh escaped the girl's lips. If only you could manage somehow to get back of a thing that was done and undo it! How could Billy—oh, how could he have ravaged the secret? How could he have stolen a march on the rightful finder? Her fingers closed on the box that her mother's girl fingers had shut and fastened. She must make certain that all was secure against the long, long years ahead. To make more sure, she must tie the box stoutly up with twine.

It was not as she had last seen it. The day after Billy had it open on his knee she had gone again to the tree to assure herself that he had put the box back, had even shaken it a little for the comfort of hearing the queer rattles. At that time a hinge had been loose and at one corner the cover bulged where Billy must have used his knife to pry with. Now on the four sides where cover and body met, ran a gleaming strip of solder put on in thick uneven blotches by unskilled fingers. Billy! thought Helen. This was Billy's work. As she looked an inspiration struck her. "I don't believe he peeked very much after all," she said.

THE GODMOTHER UNMASKED

More than once in the next twenty hours it seemed to Helen as though she were walking in some other girl's shoes. Could Crosspatch Thayer be this dazzlingly happy person whom the Holbrooks were saying with hearty conviction in their voices they wished were to stay all summer at "Red Top," who hugged Cousin Anne as she had never hugged anybody outside her very own family and then ran back from Jo's buggy for another kiss? Belle Frink skipped down to the road for a passing word as they drove through the village and May herself waved graciously from the porch.

"'Mind me to that sister o' yours," said Jo as he handed her the trunk check. "Now you've found the road you'll be comin' oftener, won't ye?"

And then Billy pranced out of the dust with a bag of lollipops "for the twins," looking as nonchalant as though he had not sprinted half the way to the village. The last Helen saw of "Red Top" was Jo's rusty straw waving from the station platform and Billy's impish brown eyes illustrating a final gibe as he jumped from the train.

"Good-bye, Miss Over-the-Wall!"

"Oh, dear! I thought he'd never get off. He stuck on just to tease me." Dropping her handkerchief, she settled back in the seat. "If I weren't going home I should cry, I know I should. How

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queer to be in layers like a cake, half of you sorry, half of you glad. But the glad part is going to be all of me pretty soon, though I shall miss 'Red Top' and 'Gray Shingles' like everything."

After the change at the Junction, she opened her suit-case and took out the book Cousin Anne had handed her shortly before Jo reined in at the porch. "It is a book I have had for some time and it will repay reading," Cousin Anne had said. Why the emphasis, Helen wondered. The facts were undeniable and obvious, but Cousin Anne had not sounded as though she meant anything obvious. The loosened cover bagged a little at the back. A dose of library paste was needed, pronounced the girl, with the critical air of one accustomed to doctor books.

This was a volume of very old fairy tales. The first looked interesting; she began to read. Page after page turned under her fingers. The second story lured her on. Here some one had left an old letter. No, the envelope was fresh and unstamped. The hold of the story wavered—snapped. The letter was addressed to her!

"Dear Nell," said the note inside. "I omitted to tell you that when Floyd and Phillis are ready to cash the wishing checks all they need do is to send them to me."

"Was anybody ever such a darling? Now

THE GODMOTHER UNMASKED

Floyd can't call it nonsense!" exulted his sister. "He will have to believe when he sees it written in black and white over Cousin Anne's signature."

"Your mother," the letter proceeded, "will know that a garden which is not very young indeed overflows every few years. This fall I shall send her part of the overflow. If there is anything she particularly desires, write me of it. Jo and I have stocked gardens for miles around 'Red Top.' Why not one in Massachusetts?"

Stealthily Helen glanced about to see if people were looking at her. All was peaceful, the old gentleman across the aisle polishing his glasses, the woman in front clucking to her baby, the young ladies behind the old gentleman talking together busily. Evidently she had not squealed aloud. Perhaps Phil was right about squealing. It might be a dangerous habit. But she wished she had hugged Cousin Anne again.

A hunt for more secrets followed. When you had found one you might find another. It did no harm to make sure. She had chased them through the book and back again before, hidden cunningly away in the heart of the fairy tales, her fingers touched the thinnest of thin envelopes bearing—oh, bliss and rapture!—the fairy godmother's delightful lettering. But it would not come out! Pulling and picking, she peered closer, discovering

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a silk thread running through the envelope and around inside the back cover. Manicure scissors cut the silk. The letter fell away in her hand ; the thread stuck. Helen tugged. Out from concealment in the loose back dropped a small, thin, yet daintily knobby package.

“ Will you have them of gold or of gossamer,” chanted the fascinating script in her ear, “ built strong for soaring or spun fine for flitting, a dragon-fly’s or an eagle’s ? Let them dazzle in the sun if you choose, or shoot like silver arrows under the moon, but be sure they are storm proof. All fairy godmothers, worth the name, use that kind.”

A tiny pair of jeweled wings slipped from the tissue folds and lay in Helen’s palm.

Another Story in this Series is :
HELEN AND THE UNINVITED GUEST

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